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PRISONERS AND CAPTIVES

VOL. II.

PRISONERS AND CAPTIVES

BY

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AUTHOR OF

"YOUNG MISTLEY," "THE PHANTOM FUTURE," "SUSPENSE"



IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

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PRISONERS AND CAPTIVES.

CHAPTER I.

BROTHER AND SISTER.

ADMIRAL GRACE rather prided himself on his dinner-parties. Like most elderly men he gave place to no one in the matter of port wine. The rest he left to Helen, in which he showed great wisdom, for she had inherited the power of making things run smoothly which had been transmitted also by a clever mother to Oswin.

There was question of a big dinner-party in the early weeks of December, and the

admiral took a lively interest in the proceedings. As Oswin was at home it had been decided that a younger element should be introduced. Helen had never thought of complaining on her own account, but when it was a question of a naval lieutenant at table with old salts she spoke up. Miss Winter was invited, of course. Helen would face nothing without her. The old sailors had wives, one of them possessed a daughter. These living arguments led to the thoughts of suitable men to meet them. The question was opened at the breakfast-table one morning, and it struck Oswin that his sister was singularly devoid of ideas. She could not think of one man suitable for the occasion. The suggestion lay with Oswin. He said at once that he had two men—both friends of Miss Winter's—both friends of his own.

Helen busied herself with the under-

structure of a small kettle simmering over a spirit-lamp.

“ Claud Tyars,” said Oswin, calmly, “ and a man called Easton—an American.”

“ An American,” echoed the admiral, looking as it were into the recesses of his memory. “ If he is a gentleman let us have him. I like Americans. I was once at Washington in an official capacity, and I may say that I never encountered a rude word or an evil glance, although the old country was not very popular then. What is this man ?”

Oswin hesitated.

“ Well,” he said, “ I cannot exactly tell you. He is like many Americans, having many tastes, and following them all—possessing many talents, and making good use of none—expert in many callings, and following each in turn. He is what is called a *littérateur*. He writes—when the

spirit moves him. He has some sort of an appointment in London. He has a great many irons in the fire, but no one iron is pushed home."

"Is he educated?" inquired Helen. "So few Americans are."

"Harvard," replied Oswin, tersely, "and languages, French, German, and Ru——" He stopped himself just in time, and went on quickly with some presence of mind. "He is a bit of an athlete too—a sailing-canoe champion, and a proverbial cox. Little man."

Helen thought of the small man she and Miss Winter had watched from that lady's drawing-room window.

"Let us have him by all means," she said. "And what about another man?"

Again the spirit-lamp beneath the silver kettle was out of order.

“Claud Tyars,” said Oswin, decisively, reaching the butter.

“I rather like that young fellow,” said the admiral, after a pause of some length, during which Oswin had munched toast in a dogged way. “He and Agnes Winter seemed to get on very well together. Let us have him too.”

“I will write to them,” said Oswin, and the matter was settled.

When the admiral grumbled off with his newspaper to the den he called his study, the brother and sister remained at the table without reason. Neither was eating, and neither spoke for some time. At length Oswin rose and took up his station upon the hearthrug, where instead of standing, he walked backwards and forwards with a peculiar action which might have suggested a caged animal to such persons as were unacquainted with the narrow deck of a slave-catcher.

“It must have been,” he said, oracularly, “frightfully slow for you during the last two years. I suppose you had no one under sixty years of age in the house . . . except—of course—Agnes Winter?”

Helen laughed with that tolerance which seems to forsake women as they grow older—as they begin to recognize that life, as lived day by day, is really a mortal permanency, and not a period leading to better things.

“Well,” she answered, “we have scarcely been gay at home; but then I have been out a great deal, and Agnes has always plenty of people about her.”

Oswin was trying experiments on the burning coals with the toe of his boot.

“Ah! What sort of people?” he inquired, in a dull voice.

Helen raised her head and directed a quick glance towards the broad back of her brother.

“ Oh,” she answered, indifferently, “ her old school-friends, who are mostly married, and some of their husbands—not all.”

“ Is she,” inquired the sailor, abruptly, “ going to live on in that house alone ? ”

“ In the meantime. She is unsettled still. It is not so very long since her father died.”

“ Has she no relations,” pursued Oswin, “ except those west-country people who are half Quakers ? ”

“ No near relations,” answered Helen ; “ no one with any right to advise or interfere.”

There was a short silence during which Helen continued to sit sideways on her chair near the table, gazing abstractedly at her brother's sturdy form. Suddenly he wheeled round and encountered her glance.

“ Why does she not marry ? ” he asked, slowly.

The girl shrugged her shoulders, and with that reply he was forced to content himself.

“She is,” he continued, “just the person for matrimony. She has money and a very nice house. It would be so convenient.”

“I do not suppose that Agnes would relinquish her liberty for the sake of convenience,” said Helen, rising and taking up a newspaper which had just come in. Her brother watched her attentively.

“It is a pity,” he said at length, quietly, “that she does not marry.”

The paper crackled as if held in unsteady hands. Helen turned a page, murmuring vaguely, “Yes.”

When she had looked all through the journal she glanced up and said—

“Who is Mr. Easton?”

It was rather a singular coincidence, this mention of Easton’s name immediately after a conversation respecting Agnes Winter.

Helen remembered it a long time afterwards, when her brother was not by her side to share the recollection.

He did not answer the question directly.

“I want,” he said, “to make things a little more cheerful for you. Therefore I bring my friends. It is not good for you to associate with none but old fogies—especially old naval fogies. You will like Easton; he is amusing and original.”

“But is he all right? You know how particular papa is.”

“Oh, he is all right; you need not be afraid of that. The guv’nor thinks that no man can be a gentleman unless he has worn the Queen’s uniform, and is at least sixty years of age. Easton is a friend of Tyars.”

At this point Helen changed the subject somewhat hastily, and other details of the approaching festivity were discussed.

It is not always easy to discover the

sequence of one's thoughts. From the first mention of the name Helen had no doubts of the identity of Matthew Mark Easton. She divined at once, and by no process of reasoning, but by unconscious intuition, that the American was no other than the third person in the short colloquy which she had witnessed from her friend's window. Whatever the girl's thoughts may have been respecting the extension of her father's hospitality to Claud Tyars, whether these were of pleasure or distrust, they were for the time set in the background by the reappearance of a man whom she had only seen once for a few moments at a considerable distance.

There are sensations working in our hearts, flitting through our brains, which we never have time to put into definite shape in our own thoughts. We are barely conscious of them, and although their influence

is sometimes to be detected by others in glance and action, we frequently pass on our way unaware of this influence—ignorant of its immediate consequence, and unsuspecting of its possible results. Thus a personal dislike is sometimes known to others, and even suspected by its object, before the feeling is fully developed in our own thoughts, before it has a definite place in our brain. This does not apply to a feeling of sympathy or affection, for these are of slower growth. Our likes develop slowly, our dislikes spring into life at one bound. A wise man would not care to be loved at first sight. Such a love may be poetic, romantic, and interesting, but human life is in reality none of these three—its sorrows have no poetry, its joys no romance. It is a great mistake to attempt making human life into anything else than a work-a-day, hard and fast span of years; and to

be in keeping our joys must be commonplace—prosaic. Of course there is a beginning to sympathy, though it be less tangible than the first sense of antipathy. We can usually look back to the commencement of a friendship and detect the sequence of the links ultimately woven into chain.

When Helen had stood beside Miss Winter, looking down into the street, her first sight of Matthew Mark Easton was in some degree an event. She felt indefinitely then that this little man was destined to enter into the radius of her existence. This feeling is difficult to define, but most of us have felt it for ourselves; most of us have given way to the momentary weakness of admitting that there is some influence at work among us which draws some souls together and erects a barrier between others. All our neighbours (using the word in its broadest sense) may be divided into two

classes—those who interest us, and those to whom we are indifferent. These two classes are independent of personal affection or dislike. Some we love without interest; others whom we dislike interest us despite ourselves.

Helen was interested in Matthew Mark Easton without knowing whether her feeling was one of pure curiosity or of sympathy. Doubtless she felt that there were new influences at work upon her brother's life, and in all probability she, as well as Miss Winter, suspected the American to be the fountain-head from whence these influences flowed. Very few women are moral cowards. The best of them—the typical English girl in fact—is afraid of very few things; she has a superb faith in her own steadfastness of purpose, and in her own sense of right and wrong. If Matthew Mark Easton was a common adventurer, Helen Grace would

sooner have trusted herself into his clutches than her brother. This is a mistake very often made by young girls. It was therefore with a certain thrill of pleasure that she looked forward to meeting a man whose influence upon her brother was not yet measurable or comprehensible, although she was certain enough of its existence.

Oswin aroused her from these meditations by a question repeated for the third time.

"Helen," he said, "what do you think of Claud Tyars?"

She looked at him with a frankly puzzled smile.

"I do not know," she answered; "I have not got anywhere near him yet."

"Then," persisted her brother, "what do you think of him from a distance?"

She nimbly avoided the question.

"Is he," she asked, "a professional mystery?"

The inquiry was made in good enough faith. In the course of her one or two seasons in London she had met more than one professional mystery—men who were nothing else than ball-room hacks, ready to accept invitations here, there, and everywhere; nineteenth-century soldiers of fortune, living by their toes, the cheap perfection of their dress, and the cheaper currency of a shallow politeness.

Oswin knew what she meant, and resented the insinuation. He was under the influence of a true maritime contempt for all carpet-knights.

“No,” he answered, “he is certainly not that. The log-book of the *Martial* could prove as much, and besides, I have another proof. Tyars has never called since he dined here two months ago.”

“No,” murmured Helen, “he has not.”

“A man who envelops himself in mystery

for the purpose of exciting interest in the fair sex would have called before this, just to keep up the interest."

"But we have met him at other houses—in theatres, and at concerts."

"None of the meetings," argued Oswin, "were of his own seeking."

"Then you think," said Helen, "that the mystery is merely indifference?"

"Well, not exactly indifference, but a diversity of interest. Our friends do not interest him, our world is not his world. He is not a ladies' man; but I see nothing mysterious about him. Where does the mystery come in?"

Helen laughed, and when she spoke her tone was lighter. This matter was evidently not worthy of serious discussion.

"Only in his reserve," she answered. "He is one of the few young men I have met who can talk of other things than their

own individuality. I expect it is the rarity that strikes me as so peculiar."

"He does not volunteer much information about himself," admitted Oswin.

"My dear boy, he volunteers absolutely nothing."

Oswin seemed to pull himself up.

"I do not see," he said, rather constrainedly, "that we need trouble about that. After all, his own affairs concern himself alone. It is not our business."

"No-o-o," said Helen, vaguely. She was watching her brother very keenly with that unobtrusive watchfulness of which some of us are conscious by our own firesides. These wives and mothers and sisters of ours—bless them!—there is no escaping their gentle grasp. When we are in bodily pain no smile deceives them, no feeble joke turns aside their scrutiny; and when we attempt

to hold something from them, they scent out its presence. The best of them refrain from mere inquisition, but they all alike know that there is something which we are clumsily attempting to screen. When a man is not absolutely cleverer than a woman he has no chance; with equal intellectual power the balance sways unerringly in favour of the woman.

Oswin Grace was a good sailor—an exceptionally good sailor—but in intellectual power, in subtlety of mind, he was no match for his sister. Helen knew well enough that there was some factor in this friendship between her brother, Claud Tyars, and Matthew Mark Easton which was being carefully withheld from her by all three men. It was moreover only owing to his sister's scruples that Oswin succeeded in preserving so profound a secrecy. Helen thought it her duty to refrain from meddling

in any way with her brother's affairs. Miss Winter was not so scrupulous—few women of her years suffer from an over-sensitive conscience.





CHAPTER II.

TYARS PAYS A CALL.

CLAUD TYARS had taken up his abode in a residential club in London. This change had been dictated by motives of economy. He said that he found chambers in the Albany too expensive for a man who was seldom in London. No one to whom he made this statement was posted as to the extent of his income, and the excuse passed readily enough.

He was certainly freer in his new quarters—free to come and go when the spirit moved him, and to some extent he took advantage of his newly-established liberty. His

absences were frequent, but he was seldom away from London for more than a night or two. He frequently ran down to Glasgow, and once to Peterhead, where he spent two nights.

One morning in early December he was partaking of a very hearty breakfast at the wanderers' club, where he had temporarily taken rooms, when Matthew Mark Easton was shown in. The American was also a member of this club, which was singularly enough composed of members of some University or another, duly qualified by the power and means to satisfy the cravings of a roaming spirit.

There was usually something original in the manner of Easton's arrival or departure. In this case, as in many others, he came straight to the point without palaver or explanation. He had a way of letting one know at once in what way one could be

useful to him, which was at times (if candid) almost startling.

Without a word he threw down upon the breakfast-table a letter of which the envelope had been torn. Tyars was quite equal to the American in quickness of thought. Preserving the same stoic silence he tossed across the table another envelope identical in every way, and addressed by the same hand. Then he continued his breakfast.

Easton assured himself that his cigar was still alight, and spoke the two words—

“Wednesday week?”

“Yes ; Wednesday week.”

“The night,” said Easton, “that we fixed for Guy Fawkes.”

“Yes. We must have the meeting on Tuesday night. We must go to this.”

Tyars laid his hand on the letter. The American’s quick little eyes were dancing

over his whole person, even to the tips of the quiescent brown fingers.

“Must we?” he inquired.

Tyars looked up sharply.

“I do not believe,” he said, “that you appreciate the importance of Oswin Grace.”

“Good sailor man!” answered the American, “but too many women-folk. They will give us trouble.”

“Grace is worth it. He is something more than a good sailor.”

Easton screwed up his quaint little face into the picture of interrogation.

“What?” he inquired.

“I don’t know,” answered Tyars, in the calm tone of a man who is not accustomed to hesitation. “I cannot define it, but he has something which makes him just the man I want.”

Easton was silent. He had a great respect for this big calm Englishman; the

sort of respect that one has for anything larger than oneself in the way of an animal. Standing, for instance, beside an elephant, we cannot help feeling that within such a vast cranium there must be a brain four or five times the size of our own—that brain must be doing something. The elephant is thinking of us while we are contemplating him, and one cannot help wondering what he is thinking about. Easton's feeling towards this man, who supplied all that there was of Force in the human combination of which he, himself, was the founder and chief, was one of respect untinged by fear, but slightly flavoured with wonder. He was by nature a voluble man, although he kept a certain hold upon himself—a hold which had for result a telegraphic form of conversation. The desire to talk was there, but a check was put upon it by limiting the supply of pronouns and other

conversational adjuncts. Tyars was, on the contrary, a reserved man little given to moments of expansion. This was a necessary part of his character. One never hears of a voluble commander. It is the silent men to whom one renders homage.

Easton was ostensibly the leader in the undertaking which had brought these two men together, and as the plot thickened he rose to the occasion with characteristic elasticity, but (as has been mentioned elsewhere) he was not a born leader of men. He occupied cheerfully and readily the position forced on him by circumstances, but such men as Claud Tyars and Sergius Pavloski are not to be led: Easton felt rather like one who is driving a pair of powerful horses down a long hill without a brake to his vehicle. He was perched up on the box and held the reins, but the limit of his control was very doubtful.

But if he lacked the genius of command he possessed a very excellent substitute ; namely, tact. By tact a weak man may sometimes direct the mind of a stronger than himself. Although he was not fully satisfied that Oswin Grace was exactly the man required for the post, he refrained from saying anything more, and never subsequently raised the question.

“ Well then,” he said, “ we will go. I shall call the meeting on Tuesday week at my rooms as before. It is the last full meeting we shall ever have. I think I shall stand champagne and an oyster or so ; they lighten the heart.”

With that he rose and held out his hand.

When he was gone Claud Tyars turned to his breakfast again. There was a calm method in his deportment. He propped up his newspaper against the cruet-stand and read while he finished a singularly hearty

repast. It is to be regretted that he failed to soliloquize aloud, and addressed no far-reaching questions as to the desirability or otherwise of human life to the toast-rack. This is to be regretted, because no one is more fully aware than the novel writer that the modern hero always soliloquizes aloud, and that the said soliloquies should be reported verbatim. It is such a simple method of taking the patient reader straight-way inside the hero's mind. We all must confess to having accompanied the modern lady-novelist inside many an heroic mind, and when there have looked with due edification, of course. The reader of these lines will however be compelled to find his way into Claud Tyars' mind alone, because the recorder has never been there himself, and cannot undertake to guide others.

It is not such an easy matter, you must

understand, to make one's way into the secret mental chambers of a man like this. He never, as Helen Grace told her brother, volunteered anything, and he was a strongly characteristic specimen of the typical modern British aristocrat. That is say, a man who cultivates (*ad nauseam* almost) the art of minding his own business, and at the same time teaches other people most plainly to mind theirs.

His actions and his words as serving to indicate the workings of his mind may be studied. From the narration of these the intelligent reader will no doubt gather as much edification as he has humbly gathered in the footsteps of the modern lady-novelist, trotting meekly after her through mazes most extraordinary, until the fact that this medley was the mind of a fellow-man seemed totally incredible. Such men may exist, but it does not fall to the lot of us poor males to

meet them, though indeed we should scarcely appreciate them if we did.

Nor would it materially assist matters if the immediate environments of Claud Tyars were minutely described. There was nothing singular about the room he occupied—merely a comfortable club-like room with a few papers lying about, heavily furnished, scrupulously clean. The only personal object to be seen was a square tin box, technically called a deed-box, and in this were secured sundry documents and letters. A man with a memory like a ledger requires neither pigeon-holes nor note-books. In direct defiance of precedent I shall omit to record whether Tyars helped himself to marmalade with a spoon or with his buttery knife ; moreover, posterity must eke out its existence without the knowledge of what he had for breakfast.

When he rose from the table and lighted

a cigarette, his first care was to collect his letters and throw them all into the fire. This was a daily custom. He seemed to take a delight in heaping fresh responsibilities upon his memory.

He spent the morning at the docks, and in the afternoon returned to his rooms tired and rather dirty. In a few minutes all signs of fatigue and work were removed, and he set off on foot to call at Brook Street, one of the best-dressed men in Piccadilly.

There was a sailor-like frankness in the way in which Salter, the admiral's butler, opened the door when the visitor was fortunate enough to find any one at home. The formal threshold question was dispensed with by the genial welcome or the heartfelt sorrow expressed by the man's brown and furrowed face.

He welcomed Tyars with a special grin and an ill-concealed desire to grab at a

forelock now brushed scrupulously back. Salter had always endeavoured through life to adapt himself ungrudgingly to circumstances, and he succeeded fairly well in remembering on most occasions that he was a butler, but his love for all mariners was a thing he never fully managed to conceal. Land-lubbers he tolerated now, and he liked a soldier, but his honest dog-like heart went out to all who like himself loved a breeze of wind and the sweet keen smell of spray. There is a bond in mutual love, whether it be of dog or horse, of sport or work, of land or sea, and Tyars always felt an inclination to shake honest John Salter by the hand when he saw him.

To these feelings of sympathy must be attributed the fact that Tyars forgot to inquire whether the admiral were at home. That some one was to be found up-stairs in the drawing-room was obvious enough from

Salter's beaming countenance, but the maritime butler omitted to give particulars.

Thus it happened that the surprise was mutual when Tyars and Helen Grace found themselves face to face alone in the drawing-room.

She had been seated at a small table near the window, and she rose to receive him, without however moving towards the door.

He came forward without appearing to notice a slight movement of embarrassment on her part, and shook hands. Most men would have launched into unnecessary explanations respecting his presence, his motive for coming, and his firm resolve to leave again at once. But Claud Tyars occasionally took it upon himself to ignore the usages of his fellows.

"I have much pleasure," he said, with grave jocularity, "in accepting your kind

invitation to dine on Wednesday week ; and I am yours truly, Claud Tyars."

Helen laughingly expressed her pleasure that he was able to come, and returned to her chair beside the little table. She was quite her gentle, contained self again. The signs of embarrassment, if such they were, had quite disappeared, and she asked him to find a chair for himself with just that modicum of familiarity which one allows oneself towards the intimate friend of a brother or sister. This he did, frankly bringing a seat nearer to the small table.

"If," he continued, "it will be any satisfaction to your hospitable mind, I will disclose the fact that my friend Easton is also able to avail himself of your kindness."

"I am glad," she said, glancing across at him with those gravely questioning eyes of hers, which somehow conjured up thoughts of olden times, of quieter days when there

was time to think and live and love. They possessed the directness of gaze noticed in Oswin Grace, but softened to a great degree, and this very softness was misleading. It disarmed one, for we all judge too freely from a mere turn of eyelid. It has been my own experience that mild and gentle eyes see just as much as those smaller orbs of which the upper and lower lid would lead one to look for great keenness of observation.

Miss Winter would perhaps have been surprised to learn that Claud Tyars and Oswin—also Matthew Mark Easton later on—dreaded the glance and question of Helen Grace infinitely more than the inquisition of such an experienced woman of the world as herself. We all know the difference between outwitting a keen diplomatist and deceiving a harmless, unsuspecting young girl. There is an unpleasant and pathetic self-reproach in worsting a foe unworthy of

one's steel. Claud Tyars enjoyed a spar with Miss Winter, while he quailed inwardly before Helen's soft eyes. Providence has placed in the hands of the guileless, defensive arms of which those possessing the knowledge of good and evil have no suspicion.

Miss Winter began by suspecting Claud Tyars of some secret purpose, and in her intercourse with him this suspicion would have been obvious to a much less observant man. The trifling gestures, glances, words that betrayed this feeling would have been retained in an ordinary mind, while to a memory like his the links of the chain were each one evident. Miss Winter treated him as a conspirator and as a possible enemy; Helen took an infinitely cleverer course—she treated him frankly as a friend.

To us who watch these people from one side it cannot be otherwise than manifest that this treatment was hard to cope with.

Whatever Claud Tyars might be at heart, villain or hero (and I set him up as neither), this girl's method of taking him as she found him, namely, as a friend, could not fail to touch the best and manliest instincts of his heart.

If any of us, and doubly so if a young and lovely maiden, persistently and methodically treat a traitor as a friend, the chances are very much against the survival of treachery. However subtle, however deep may be the traitor's villainy, human nature lives somewhere in his black heart, and that one touch which is said to make the whole world kin can only be imparted by the hand of Faith. The way to make men trustworthy is to trust in them. And Helen Grace, in giving way to the intuition that drew her towards this self-contained gentleman, assumed at one bound a power over him far and away stronger than

that possessed by any other man or woman.

After her words of politeness there was a short silence, and as she looked at her companion across the little table a glow slowly rose over her throat and face. Then, as if giving way to a sudden impulse, she spoke.





CHAPTER III.

AN EXPLANATION.

“MR. TYARS,” she said, “I have an apology to make to you.”

He looked at her without speaking for some moments. In another man one would almost have suspected a desire to prolong the contemplation of a very lovely, shamed face.

“For what ? ” he said, at length.

“For disliking you—I mean for beginning to dislike you. I don’t—I—that was at first.”

“I wonder,” he said, with quick mercy, “if you know why you began by disliking me.”

“ I think I do.”

He smiled, and turned away his eyes rather suddenly. There was a paper-knife lying on the table, and he took it up, subsequently balancing it on his finger, while she watched him with vague and mechanical interest.

“ Tell me,” he said.

“ Jealousy.”

“ Ah !”

He glanced almost furtively towards her, and caught a passing smile. It was now his turn to look ill at ease. She maintained silence in a determined way which somehow threw the onus of the pause on to his shoulders.

At last he threw the paper-knife down on to the table with a clatter.

“ You are right,” he said, almost humbly.

“ I have acted like—a coward.”

“ And you are not a coward ?”

He raised his eyebrows. The glance of her eyes as they rested on his great stalwart frame cancelled the interrogation.

“I have never thought so until now.”

She shook her head with rather a wistful smile.

“Then I have reason,” she said, “to be jealous. You are drawing Oswin away from me?”

Before replying he rose, and during the rest of their conversation he never took a seat again, but continued moving about the room with a certain strange restlessness which is very uncommon in big men. Its presence may generally be taken to denote an unusual energy—an energy of that description which leads to great deeds of some sort or another. There was a little carpeted space between the fireplace and the window, and here he paced backwards and forwards, sometimes stopping at the window, some-

times on the hearthrug. The action so reminded Helen of her father and brother (both sailors) that it seemed to conjure up a new familiarity between these two young people.

“It is,” he said, “a long story. Are you prepared for a chapter of egotism? It is all about myself.”

She allowed her work and hands to fall upon her lap, and looked towards him with an evident interest and curiosity of which she did not know the danger.

“Yes,” she said. “Tell me. I want to be told.”

“I belong,” he said, “to such a quarrelsome family that I have practically no relations in the world. When my father married, his brothers and sisters turned their backs upon him. When he died they quarrelled over his dead body; when my mother followed him they quarrelled again.

I was a little chap then, but I told them never to interfere with me again, and they have not forgotten it. I am practically alone in the world, with no one to rejoice over my success or weep over my failures. The position is eminently satisfactory. Being pig-headed, I overruled my guardians, and had practical control over my own income at college. Of course unlimited means at one of the Universities usually leads to a rapid descent to the dogs. After a year, I found I was no nearer the dogs than I had been at first, and, strange to say, had no desire for further progress. I began to find that I was different from my contemporaries, inasmuch as they all had relatives, and most of them possessed prospects of some sort. Many had livings, or commissions, or appointments waiting for them. I had nothing. All this caused me to wonder why I had been created, and what I should

do with myself in the world. A sort of superstition crept into my mind. I began to attach an importance to outward circumstances. In my conceit I imagined that Providence had gone out of her way to create me for some special purpose. I was athletic, and was considered one of the soundest human animals at Cambridge. There was not a flaw anywhere; I have never had anything worse than a headache all my life. You see, I had health, wealth, strength, and perfect independence. I looked round and saw that I was almost alone in this position, and my blessings grew into a sort of responsibility. I felt that I ought to do something, that I had no right to hoard up the capital Providence had given me."

Here he paused, half-way between the window and the fireplace.

"Then," he said, looking at her for

the first time, "I met Matthew Mark Easton !"

She gave a little nod as if urging him to continue his narrative. Her eyes were following him with much more interest than prudent young women should show in members of the opposite sex ; for men being deprived of open flattery are ready enough to imagine it for themselves.

"He is," continued Tyars, "the very opposite to me from a physical point of view. He has hardly an organ in full working order, and consequently his brain works harder. He is a cleverer man than I. I am strong, but I am not clever, Miss Grace. Easton is an originator, and he is an orator. He showed me what there was for me to do in the world. I recognized the truth of his arguments and took up my mission."

"What is your mission ?" she asked.

Again he stopped. He stood before her with his strong arms hanging motionless, his great brown hands half closed and quite still, as they always were unless actually at work. He certainly was a picture of strength, a perfect specimen of the human animal as he had called himself. But with it all he was not dense. Perhaps he judged himself from other big men when he told Helen Grace that his muscular force was greater than his brain power. If so his estimate was unnecessarily humble, ignoring as it did his wonderful memory, carrying with it quite a legion of such qualities as are required for every-day competition with our fellow-men. It is probable that he was quite unconscious of the possession of another power, namely, that of managing his neighbours. It was the genius of command, and he wielded it without recognition. This same genius is often found in strange places ;

some small and fragile women have it, and that is why many big husbands are bullied.

“Arctic exploration,” he answered. “I mean to reach the North Pole some day.”

It happened that Helen knew a good deal about Arctic matters. The admiral had been bitten by the strange craze in his younger days. Like many others he had for a time given way to the spirit of exploration which is hidden somewhere in every Englishman’s heart. Every book of Arctic travel yet printed was to be found in his smoke-scented den, and Helen had read most of them.

She knew therefore what the end would be. To hear a man say that he intends to reach the North Pole is one thing, to know what he is talking about and believe in his intention is quite another. To Helen Grace the fuller knowledge was given, and she

sat looking at Claud Tyars with a dull anguish in her eyes.

“And you want Oswin?” she whispered.

He did not answer, but turned away as from something that he could not face, and stood by the window looking down into the street.

He was what is vaguely called a gentleman. There are certain points of honour which we Englishmen learn at school, and there are, thank heaven! not many of us who find pleasure in deceiving one who is weaker than ourselves. Could he have explained all, it would have been so different. Naturally slow of speech as he was, he felt then that he could have pleaded to this girl a cause which he honestly thought a true and righteous one. His mind reverted to Matthew Mark Easton; he thought of the quaint little American with his strange eloquence, and felt that he at all events

would have carried all before him with the sister of Oswin Grace. But they were all three tongue-tied. They could not appeal to her, pointing out that she had not grudged her brother for a service of great humanity, and that this was only a greater sacrifice for a greater cause. This is no place to draw comparisons between the two great blots upon this fair earth. There is, however, no comparison. Siberia is a nearer approach to hell on earth than Africa.

Helen Grace naturally argued that she was called upon to give up her only brother, indeed almost the only contemporary relative she possessed, in order to further the ambition of one man. And this man had come to her coolly announcing his demand.

He stood beside the window not moving a muscle. All this had been thought out. This interview had been foreseen. Oswin

had asked that he might break the news to his sister and father, but Tyars had claimed the right himself. His was the onus, and his must be the blame. There was no desire to shirk responsibility ; indeed he seemed to court it. Helen Grace must be deceived—it was a contemptible thing to do, a dirty task—and he would have none other but himself. He stubbornly took it all upon his own shoulders.

“ I suppose,” said Helen, at last, “ that he wants to go.”

“ Of course,” was the answer. “ What English sailor would not ? But I persuaded him—the fault is all mine.”

She looked up sharply.

“ And Mr. Easton ? ” she inquired, with keen logic.

“ Yes . . . yes. But I chose your brother. The matter rests with me, and . . . the blame.”

“What has Mr. Easton to do with it?” she asked, and he knew that she was already prejudiced against the American.

“He is getting up the expedition—the first one.”

“And he goes with you?”

“No,” replied Tyars, “I have already told you—he is physically incapacitated.”

She gave a little laugh—a very unpleasant laugh for a man to hear from the lips of a woman. Fortunately Matthew Mark Easton was spared the cruelty of hearing it. Then she relapsed into silence again, and they remained thus for some moments.

At last she spoke, without looking towards him.

“I like you,” she said, “for telling me. There were so many other ways of doing it—so many easier ways for you—but you chose to tell me yourself.”

To this he said nothing. Despite his

capable air, despite an unusual rapidity of thought which took the form of action in emergencies, he was not able to reel off glib phrases at the proper moment.

Suddenly her proud self-restraint seemed to give way.

"I suppose," she said, softly, almost pleading, "that nothing will deter you."

He turned and came towards her.

"One word from you would deter me," he said, "but I do not think that you will say it."

"No," she answered with a smile; "I am not going to ask you to let my brother off."

"I did not know how he was circumstanced when I first met him," said Tyars in self-excuse, "I did not know of your existence."

"Of course," she said, with a little shrug of the shoulders, "I am not going to be

silly and stand in my brother's way. Only it would have been so much better could you have found some one—like yourself—without brother or sister, or any one to care much for him. It is not only for myself . . .”

She stopped suddenly. There was a moment of tense silence. Then he slowly approached her until the little table alone separated them.

“Miss Grace,” he said, slowly, “what do you mean?”

She was not the kind of woman to resort to subterfuge or useless denial, and she therefore held her tongue. At the same time she began to feel very helpless. With Oswin, with her father, and with all men whom she had hitherto known, she could hold her own, but with Claud Tyars it was different. There was in his presence a force which did not take the form of words. He merely stood still, and his silence was

stronger than any words she had yet heard. Then he spoke slowly and quite gently—

“You must tell me,” he said, “what you mean.”

She glanced up at him appealingly beneath her lashes, at bay and yet almost mastered.

He softened a little.

“Unless,” he added, “it would be a breach of confidence.”

“No,” she answered, “it is not that ; for no one has confided in me. But I think . . .”

“You are not sure ?” he interrupted eagerly.

“Yes, Mr. Tyars, I am sure.”

He turned away again and went towards the window. She mechanically took up her work, and for some time both were fully occupied with their own thoughts.

As stated previously, Helen Grace knew as much about Arctic matters as any one

who had not been over the frozen threshold could well know. It is not given to us all to pass that threshold, to step into the great silent North, where all things seem to be waiting. Waiting for what?—none can tell; but that is undoubtedly the sense imparted by the atmosphere of the Arctic circle. In the cold black rocks, in the lapping of the dead waves round the ice-floes; in the very creak of the restless ice itself there is a great expectancy. The gray birds as they wheel slowly in the gray sky seem to say, “We are waiting.” And the seal says it, and the long-legged hare running noiselessly, as if fearing to disturb God’s great silence. The prowling wolf, the shambling bear, all confess to an incompleteness. If any man say that the world is complete, that all things are finished, that the end is near, let him go to the frozen North. If he have eyes to see, and

ears to hear, he cannot fail to recognize that there is yet something to be done. In all parts of the habitable earth nature is complete, self-sufficing, independent; but in the twilit zone there is something still to be accomplished; something wrong—something to be evolved in God's good time.

A few have tried to penetrate that grim frozen chaos; a few lives have been thrown away—a few bones are lying yonder; but it is only the matter of a mile or two for which we compete. Some are allowed to reach a greater latitude than others, some sail in clear water where others have been crushed in midsummer. Some penetrate far across the border, while the majority of us turn back at the very threshold; but we all bring away in our hearts the same conviction, whether we speak of it or no, namely, that man was never meant to go there yet.

The short winter day was drawing in

before Claud Tyars left Brook Street. As he shook hands with Helen he said—

“I had the pleasure of meeting Miss Winter the other evening.”

“Yes,” replied Helen; “she told me.”

That was all, but they understood each other. A stress upon a single word, a glance, a little hesitation, will say so much that cannot be set down in print. The unfinished conversation was terminated. Claud Tyars knew that there was some one else to watch and wait for Oswin Grace if he went to the Arctic seas.

He had only been in the room an hour—a dismal November afternoon hour—and yet there was a difference in his life as he left the door. It does not take long to make a friend.





CHAPTER IV.

THE LAST MEETING.

THERE is no cloak for tears like laughter. He is a strong man who merely does nothing in the midst of tears. Most men either laugh or weep, but some there are who remain grave.

Matthew Mark Easton was not a strong man. The last meeting of the association he was pleased to call "Guy Fawkes" was looked forward to by him with positive dread. This was not the outcome of a great responsibility. He did not hold himself responsible for Pavloski and his three compatriots, for he knew well enough that

he himself was but a means to the end. If these four Russians had not met with him, they would still have gone to Siberia ; for they were branded, their souls were seared by the hot iron—the thrice-heated iron of unquenchable vengeance.

The truth was that the little American had a warm heart. He had learnt to like these men, to respect the curse of their nationality ; for to him it was naught else than a curse. And, indeed, no man would willingly be a Russian—no man worth his salt.

This meeting was the beginning of the end. Many times had these six, and latterly seven, men met in the American's room. They were bound together by the ties of a joint interest, by the riven bond of a common danger.

To-night they were to meet again ; they were to partake once more of the open-

handed transatlantic hospitality, and in all human probability the same seven men would never stand under one roof again. Of course such things happen every day. It is no good waxing sentimental. Avaunt, mawkish melancholy! Sensible men and women like ourselves do not worry about such trifles. It is much better to take it cheerfully, as did Matthew Mark Easton. Provide oysters and champagne—especially champagne, it is a rare specific—and crack jokes. Only do not laugh at them too loud and too quickly, as if it does not matter much about the joke so long as the laugh is sonorous. But above all avoid any reference to the future, because in the loudest of laughter there are pauses—some jokes fall flat, and moments of thoughtfulness creep in.

Sergius Pavloski was the first to arrive. Immaculate, cold, and self-contained as usual;

his old-fashioned dress clothes scrupulously brushed, his large amethyst shirt-studs brightly polished. There was a steady glitter in his unpleasantly veiled eyes, but his manners were always suave and courtly.

“Ah, Smith!” cried Easton; “punctual as usual. We business men know its value, eh?—especially at meal-times. I’ve got a new box of caviare, my boy. Found it in a German *delicatessen-handlung* in Wardour Street. The real thing, in a white china box; looks like saddle-paste.”

He drew his guest to a little side-table, where liqueurs and a few delicacies were set out in the Russian fashion, and they gravely examined the caviare which had been purposely left in the small china box, bearing a printed label in Russian characters, as one sees it in the Newski Prospect shop-windows.

The interest which Pavloski displayed in this small waif from his own land was a

trifle too eager to be quite natural. Easton made little jokes about the beneficial effect likely to accrue to his rusty Russian by the consumption of caviare, and they got through the bad quarter of an hour somehow, until the bell rang again. They were acting a part most obviously, and rather badly.

The little office in the city had been almost their home for the last two years, and within its four bare walls they had worked together steadily, and with that restrained enthusiasm which turns out good labour. The two heads bowed together over the little box of preserved fish had hatched and conceived a most wondrous plot. They had talked of many things together; had counted lives as other men count their money.

Easton knew more of this man's history than any other human being. He alone knew that Sergius Pavloski was, of all the

seven associates, by far the most dangerous man ; that to him human life, whether his own or that of another, was not a sacred thing at all. And now the great scheme was maturing. The first decisive move had been made. Pavloski was to leave England in twenty-four hours. The little office was closed ; their joint labours were finished.

When the guests were assembled, Easton led the way to another room, where dinner was served. He had carried out his intention of offering to his guests the best that could be procured for money, and full justice was done to the fare provided. The usual silence upon the subject of their meeting was observed until the meal was over, and all chairs were drawn round the fire.

Then the informal proceedings commenced. Matthew Mark Easton was a trifle more restless than usual ; his mobile features alternated between grave and gay, while his

dancing eyes were never still. He fidgeted at times with his slim hands, and referred constantly to the lighted end of his cigarette.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “we have done a vast deal of talking, and now at last some of us are going into action. Of course I have done the most talking, and now that the time for action has come, I occupy a retired seat in the background. That is the good God’s dispensation, not mine. But I hope that the result of all my talking will be useful in the hereafter. Each one of you knows his part, and each one of you, of course, will do his best; I know that—at least I surmise so. The three gentlemen who leave us to-night for Siberia take absolutely nothing with them except a little money. There are no maps, no letters, no instructions, nothing that an enemy can get hold of. We have, however, taken measures

to supply them with money at various stages of the journey. We have also completed a method of communication, by means of which the safe progress of the travellers can from time to time be reported to St. Petersburg, and subsequently to the head-quarters in London. But in case of partial failure—if, I mean, one of you should . . . fail—it is quite understood that the others go on. Mr. Tyars undertakes to get his ship round Cape Chelyuskin, and to wait for you at the meeting-place arranged, namely, the westernmost mouth of the river Yana, not far from Oust Yansk, where we have a good friend. On the tenth of July he sails from thence to complete the North-east passage, and reach the coast of Alaska. That date, gentlemen, is fixed. If no one comes to meet him he goes on alone, but he hopes to see you all three, and each with a party not exceeding fifteen persons.”

The three men turned their dull eyes towards the two Englishmen seated side by side, and the American seeing the action paused. Unconsciously the seven men assembled had grouped themselves into order. The stout Russian and Easton were seated side by side with their backs to the table, and on their left were placed the three young Russians, while on the right the two British sailors sat side by side—a big man and a small one—the lesser and the greater power.

It would be hard to say what thoughts passed through the minds of these five men. A better pen than mine could scarce lift one corner of the veil. Now they were seated in a warm room, surrounded by comfort; when next they met, if they were destined ever to see each other again, it would be far within the Arctic circle. The three foreigners were virtually placing their

lives and those of their friends in the hands of these two resolute navigators, and they did it with the impassive coldness which is such a terrible curse to the Slavonic race. Each pair of eyes seemed to say, "I wonder if you will meet us there," but nothing more. The two sailors smiled in response. They belonged to a different race—a race that smiles but rarely laughs, that acts but rarely threatens, a race which (as may be learnt from history) has fought Nature more successfully than any other. And this was a fight with Nature. She is an enemy that is sometimes very careless, but on the other hand she knows no mercy. There were no protestations, no vows to do or die. It must be remembered that these conspirators belonged to the nineteenth century, a century much given to sliding, and little addicted to protestations of any description. The three Russians merely gazed with

their singularly expressionless eyes, and the Englishmen smiled in a ludicrously characteristic way. Then Easton went on—

“Of course,” he said, “the distances are enormous; but we have endeavoured to equalize them as much as possible. The meeting-point has been fixed with a view to this. It is the southernmost anchorage obtainable east of Cape Chelyuskin, though it is far within the Arctic circle. Of course secrecy is the chief aim, and has been the chief aim we have kept in view all along. Each of you knows his own department, and that only. Each of you keeps to himself the meeting-place and the date, not even divulging them to the rescued exiles under your care. We have succeeded, I surmise, in keeping our scheme completely secret. No one knows of it except ourselves, not even the Nihilist party in London. We must remember that we are

not Nihilists, but merely seven men engaged upon a private enterprise. We have friends who have been unjustly exiled, many of them without a trial—upon mere suspicion. We are attempting to rescue those friends, that is all.”

“Yes,” echoed the stout man, speaking for the first time, “that is all. I seek my daughter.”

“And I my sister,” said one.

“And I my brother,” said another.

“It is,” added Pavloski, slowly, “a wife with me.”

Tyars and Grace said nothing. They had not quite thought it out, and were unprepared with a reason. Easton was more at ease now. He lighted a cigarette, and consulted a little note-book hitherto concealed in his waistcoat-pocket.

“I have endeavoured,” he continued, without taking his eyes from the pocket-

book, "to make every department independent as much as possible. For instance, my own death would in no wise affect the expedition. The money and information would after such an event continue to filter through to Siberia by the pre-arranged channels. In case of the death or imprisonment of our agent in St. Petersburg the same communications would be kept open. We each have a substitute, and the arrangements are so simple that these substitutes will have no difficulty in carrying them out. I need scarcely tell you that heavy bribes have been sent to the right quarters in Siberia—high official quarters."

The stout man grunted in a knowing way, and signified by a little nod of the head that no further interruption need be feared.

"In Russia," continued Easton, turning the pages of his note-book, "we all know

that every official has his price. The only difficulty lies in the discovery of that price. The only parts that have not been doubled are those of the three gentlemen who go out to Siberia to organize the escape of the prisoners and exiles. I surmise that it is unnecessary to point out that these parts cannot be doubled. There are not three other such men to be found. As to our ship, she was built for Arctic service, and has been thoroughly strengthened above and below under the personal supervision of Mr. Tyars and myself. In Mr. Tyars and Lieutenant Grace we have two sailors eminently calculated to bear the strain that will be put upon them. Humanly speaking they may be trusted to do all that man can do, to get the *Argo* round Cape Chelyuskin to the rendezvous by the date named. It has always been understood between us that mutual trust and mutual

assistance are things to be taken without saying. We all trust each other, and in case of failure, partial or entire, no blame is to be attached to any individual. This is our last meeting in London. Some of us may see each other again. I trust to God we shall. I trust that He who knows no nationalities will bring five of you together again next summer."

There was a pause. Matthew Mark Easton turned the pages of his note-book in a vague, aimless way. Then suddenly he rose, threw his cigarette into the fire, and turning to the table, drew forward the decanters. He poured himself out a glass of wine, which he drank, keeping his back towards his guests. Then in that same position, without looking round, he spoke in a low tone of voice—

"Gentlemen," he said, "my report is finished."

There followed upon this a painful silence. The Russians looked at each other vaguely. None of them were good English scholars, though they all understood the language perfectly, and spoke it without marked accent. Perhaps also no one of them had anything very special to say. Just as the pause became embarrassing Tyars took the cigar from his mouth and spoke with that high-bred calmness which is at times a trifle aggravating.

“I have thought it necessary,” he said, “to give out the information that I am fitting up a private Arctic expedition, of which the object is the exploration of the North-eastern passage. My reasons for doing this are numerous. It is difficult to fit up a ship in London without attracting the attention of maritime newspapers, and it is imperative that suspicion be averted from the first. I had the misfortune to

get into the newspapers a few months ago, and a society journal, on the staff of which are two college contemporaries of my own, has taken the trouble to inquire publicly what I was doing on board a merchantman in the West Indies. A certain amount of publicity will insure the information reaching the Russian authorities that an expedition is to start in the spring, and our presence on the north coast will then cause no surprise or suspicion. Again, Arctic exploration is a matter of keen interest in England, and a few short paragraphs in the leading newspapers will not only give me the choice of the best men obtainable, but will lead to an influx of volunteered information and advice from whaling captains and former explorers."

There was a business-like terseness about the announcements of this man which, while in keeping with his calling (a calling which

cannot afford to look on the shady side of things), seemed to volunteer the information that he, at all events, was not prepared to bear part in an affecting leave-taking. The result of this was that the party broke up with a mere shake of the hand, and the last meeting of this strange conspiracy was a thing of the past.

These men had been from the first singularly careless respecting outward things. They totally ignored from first to last the picturesqueness of conspiracy, the romance of secrecy, the dramatic intensity of their situation. It is a painful duty to record that they lighted fresh cigars and drove away in hansom cabs.





CHAPTER V.

A DINNER-PARTY.

MOST men pass through life without finding themselves in direct opposition to a good woman. With other women it is of course another matter ; but few of us really fear bad women. Their power is not so great as is generally supposed by anxious mothers.

Those men who usually find themselves opposed by good women are not the best of the species, and fortunately they form the minority. The bad make the greatest stir in the world, but the good and the indifferent form together an overwhelming

majority, and despite biblical teaching it is always a consolation to suppose that there is a strong dividing line between badness and indifference. When a poll is demanded, and they are forced to vote, the indifferent ones sometimes bring about a wondrous majority, and show themselves surprisingly keen-sighted.

Claud Tyars had now declared war. The gauntlet was thrown down, and there was one person from whose antagonistic glance he would fain have withdrawn it; we, most of us, have felt this at one time or another, this vague misgiving that the wrong person will pick up our defiant glove—the one person in the neighbourhood whom we fear.

As Tyars entered the drawing-room on the evening of the dinner-party at Brook Street, he mentally pulled himself together for the fray. Miss Winter was there, of course, and in her battle array. She was

dressed as he had never seen her dressed before, with all the cunning gathered from a mature experience. Not as a girl, but as herself, for she knew how to array to full advantage a most perfect figure. She did not look up as Tyars and Easton entered the room, but continued to talk gaily with a vastly courteous old mariner.

Helen came forward, shook hands with Tyars, and received the American very graciously. The admiral was at her skirts, and Tyars included him in the introduction.

With inimitable *sang-froid* Easton proceeded to make himself agreeable in the slightly ponderous style affected by his countrymen. This manœuvre left Helen and Tyars alone for a moment.

“Does,” inquired he at once, “Miss Winter know?”

The girl looked up at him with a smile which was the veriest reflex of his own.

They had already learnt to deceive on-lookers, and any one watching their conversation from across the room would have decided at once that the merest common-places were in course of exchange.

“Yes; every one knows. It was in the *Times* this morning.”

“I thought they did,” laughed Tyars, softly: “they are staring me up and down like a wild animal.”

“They are old sailors, you see.”

“So I guessed,” replied Tyars. “But they do not know about your brother—Miss Winter?”

“She guesses,” whispered Helen, hurriedly. Then aloud—“Come and let me introduce you to some of my friends.”

He followed her, and went through the ceremony with that peculiar lack of enthusiasm which frequently caused him to be misjudged by strangers. It would appear

that he was so absorbed in his one idea that things not bearing directly upon it failed to interest him. These old men and their wives, also their daughters, were useless to him, and therefore he was polite, so polite as to be almost rude. He failed utterly to convey to them by smile and glance that the moment of meeting them was the apogee of his existence—that life was now complete, and that he would ever cherish them as his dearest friends. Now we all know that without the constant and repeated conveyance of these sentiments no one can expect to get on in society. People do not believe them, but they like to be offered the choice of doing so.

Tyars had only time to exchange a bow with Miss Winter before dinner was announced.

“Tyars,” the admiral said, plucking confidentially at his sleeve, “will you take Miss Winter down?”

He wondered a little whether this was the result of chance, or otherwise. When they were on the stairs he found that they had not spoken, amidst the babel of expectant tongues.

"The admiral," he said, promptly repairing the error, "told me to take you down."

She laughed, catching his meaning at once.

"You have my sympathy," she said. "How do you propose doing it?"

"Of course," he replied, with mock helplessness, "I cannot do it."

"Oh, yes, you can! I have been taken down heaps of times by men of your stamp; you are just the man to do it."

"What is my stamp?" he inquired, as they seated themselves.

She was half turned towards him, drawing in the rich folds of her skirt, and she

glanced up at him with a little smile qualified by raised eyebrows.

“The muscularly restless,” she answered.

“And are muscularity and restlessness qualifications by which one may expect to compete successfully against . . .”

“Against what?” she inquired, saucily, for she scented a compliment.

“Against you.”

“Yes ; men like you who travel and try their constitutions, explore and ill-treat natives, sail where others have never sailed, climb where others have not been able to climb, are always at the top of a pinnacle. You look down upon womankind as an ornament to be admired by softer men, or as a useful adjunct to old age. You talk to them with bowed head, and mouth your carefully-selected two-syllable words as if talking to a baby or a foreigner. Some of you look upon us as pretty fools, to be

looked at and admired in a patronizing way, while others are condescending enough to talk to us, as if we really understood the rudiments of a few matters in which they take interest."

All this was covered by the garrulous chatter of sundry old gentlemen and ladies, who while enjoying immensely their soup found time to talk all at once.

Tyars glanced towards the foot of the table, and in a moment his eyes returned to the same spot again. With him a keen observation of the human face had become second nature. All who know men and women well know the language of the human face, and without this knowledge there has not been a true commander yet. The look that he had surprised in Helen's eyes was full of significance. He had caught her watching himself, and there was in the drawn lines about her lips the signal of a

distress which was assuredly something more than the anxiety of a young hostess at the foot of a well-filled table. It was all noted and recorded in the space of a second, and he turned to his companion.

For a moment he meditated before answering her. He was not smiling now, but there was a look almost amounting to one of relief upon his face. Here, at all events, was a foe worthy of his steel, a spirit equal to his own. This was a fair fight, and no favour. Miss Winter knew of his projects, guessed that he had entrapped, or at least over-persuaded, Oswin Grace to share the perils ; and she was not reproachful. She was defiant, and defiance, although a spirited policy in its way, was an utterly mistaken one to pursue against a man like Claud Tyars. There was no opposition he loved meeting and quelling so much as open defiance.

“Supposing,” he said, “that I am one of those men (which I do not admit), I am not ready to allow the applicability of any one of your charges. If I appear to look down from a pinnacle, it is an optical delusion. I am in reality looking up. I have an immense respect for the female intellect; there are recesses in it to which I cannot come near penetrating. Any school-girl can beat me in the game of repartee. If I bow my head and mouth my words, it is owing to shyness. As you have no doubt discovered long ago, Miss Winter, I am not much accustomed to ladies’ society.”

She laughed merrily. Then suddenly she became grave, and, turning, she looked at him with considerable keenness.

“Do you really expect me,” she asked, with genuine surprise, “to believe that? No, Mr. Tyars, assuredly you have no respect for the female intellect. Do you

not know that knowledge is considerably more difficult to conceal than ignorance? The very first time I saw you, while you walked across the drawing-room up-stairs, and while I was trying to recollect where I had met with you before, I knew at once that you were a man of the world, and a man who had at one time or other moved in society more than you care to admit now. Men are different from women in that respect. We like to boast of having been gay in our youth, while you seem ashamed of it. I do not think you are shy. You are an old hand (if you will excuse my dock language), almost as old a hand as myself."

He caught the reference to their last meeting, and concluded that there was a motive in it.

"I am more accustomed to the society of such persons as Peters," he said, coolly.

She was helping herself sparingly from a silver dish, and appeared to be fully absorbed in her occupation. Without looking towards her companion she turned her attention to her plate.

“So,” she said, “that is the ship?”

“Yes—that is the ship.”

“I have known old Peters,” she continued, conversationally, “for a long time. He and I are quite friendly, although his supply of small talk is limited.”

“Ay,” observed Tyars, reproducing the tone and accent of the Scotch ship-carpenter to perfection.

“I have always admired his discretion,” said the lady, ignoring Tyars’ evident desire to find a more general and less personal topic. “He is a very deep well, so deep that there is not even the faintest glimmer at the bottom. I am an intensely inquisitive person, Mr. Tyars, and I have given some

study to the art of asking questions. Peters is one of the few from whom I find difficulty in extracting information."

"He is Scotch."

"Yes—but—is he dense?"

"No," was the grudging answer.

"I thought not. I was not quite sure, however. I noticed that he rarely made a mistake. Of course I knew that there was a mystery about the vessel. Some of the ship-keepers were interested in her, and asked me questions. I cannot say, however, that my curiosity was very much aroused."

"It is a habit with him," explained Tyars. "I put him in that position partly on account of his discretion. I wished to avoid being pestered by would-be heroes of tender years. And I have always found that discreet people are the best workers. They give less time to the affairs of their neighbours."

Miss Winter was too keen an observer to take this as a personal allusion. It was too clumsy for such a man as Tyars.

“Perhaps they do,” she said. “What I like about Peters is his rugged, dirty old face. It is worth while to simulate curiosity in order to watch his expression. His features are like stone—the lines are so hard and deep. He is the incarnation of caution.”

“Caution,” opined Tyars, vaguely, “wearies me. I have no patience with it.”

She turned and looked at him with dancing eyes. He raised his eyebrows in amusement.

“Have I made a joke?” he inquired.

“Well—no,” she replied, returning to her plate, “I do not think you have. I thought you were cautious, but you are not—you are merely alert—the most alert man I have ever met. I have caught Oswin, and

Peters, and Mr. Easton even ; but I have never caught you."

"I did not know," he said, innocently, "that you were on the look-out for a catch."

"Oh," she said, meaningly, "indeed. Did you not?"

"Why should you be?" he asked, and at the same time he looked gravely into her face. If this was acting he admitted to himself that it was a splendid performance. For it must be remembered that he was fully convinced that this cheery little woman loved his first lieutenant, Oswin Grace.

His glance was returned by one full of light-hearted defiance—the impenetrable glance of a beautiful woman of the world, fully capable of guarding her one great secret, the history of her own heart.

"Curiosity," she returned. "Mere curiosity!"

It was just this curiosity that he feared, and he was not the man to be caught off his guard.

“Why?” he asked. “What did you want to know?”

“I thought,” she said, calmly, “that you were leading a friend of mine astray.”

“Oswin Grace?”

“Yes.”

“So I was,” he said.

She shrugged her shoulders. An opportunity presented itself for her to turn to the gentleman on her right hand, and she availed herself of it, entering at once into a lively conversation.

Some one else addressed Tyars, and he had no further occasion to beware of Miss Winter's curiosity during dinner.

He was too experienced, too “old a hand,” as Miss Winter had tersely put it, to give way to pre-occupation. He knew

that he had a duty to fulfil towards Helen Grace, his hostess. He had been invited in order that he might talk and make others talk; that he might wear a black coat, and separate two lighter toilettes, and he proceeded to carry out his duty. To some extent Matthew Mark Easton and he were the features of the evening. They formed the novelty which is such an important factor to the human sense of enjoyment. For novelty is the sought of all seekers, whether it be in society, in art, or in literature. We write, and some one reads. Perhaps the reader casts aside the work of our brain, our best and earnest work—perhaps he reads and tells others of what he has read. A passing, hollow reputation is the result, and we fly to ink and paper again; but even while we write we know that all is evanescent, that it is only for a time. It is only the novelty that attracts.

When our brain is laid bare, when a thought is perchance repeated, then we are voted effete—played out—gone by.

And so these two men bore the heat and burden of the entertainment. By the time that the soup had left the room Helen knew that she had scored a success, and this knowledge gave her confidence. She played her part as she had never played it before, and her soft-hearted old father exchanged more than one moist-eyed but knowing glance with an ancient comrade, after a comprehensive little nod towards the foot of the table.

There was only one little signal of discomfort displayed at times, and this was so small that it probably passed almost unnoticed. It was, however, observed by the very person from whom it should have been concealed. Claud Tyars, while laughing and making others laugh, while drawing

out the dry wit of his friend Easton, and while making himself universally agreeable in a downright way, never failed to catch the troubled glances directed by Helen Grace towards Miss Winter and himself. It is probable that the girl was unconscious of these glances, and it would appear that Miss Winter failed to notice them, although the sudden cessation of interest in the conversation of Claud Tyars followed closely upon a glance from Helen's eyes.

A few words murmured under her breath as she followed the ladies up-stairs may have had something to do with this matter.

"I wonder," she said, "whether it is on her own account, or on Oswin's, that she is jealous."

And it is worth noting that Claud Tyars was not allowed an opportunity during the evening of exchanging another *tête-à-tête* word with Miss Winter.

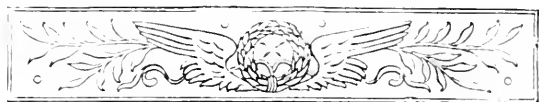
When the ladies left the room there was a pause. Four or five pairs of keen old eyes were directed from beneath white brows towards Tyars, Easton, and Oswin, who had either instinctively or accidentally drawn together.

Tyars knew well enough that he was regarded with considerable ill-favour among these old mariners; but the knowledge exercised no disturbing influence upon his equanimity. It was the ill-favour of the setting luminary towards that which was rising—the malevolent twinkle of the sinking star towards the east. No old sailor will admit that there are navigators afloat to-day. An old novelist is quite convinced that printers have to deal with naught but trash in modern times.

The old sailors waited for some time, expecting Tyars to begin his defence, but to their surprise and disappointment the

subject of Arctic exploration was completely ignored. In this neglect Admiral Grace assisted the three younger men, for he knew of the project, and quite approved of Oswin's action. To be among the few, to know something more than one's neighbours, is very pleasant, and the admiral fully relished his position.





CHAPTER VI.

EASTON WATCHES.

THERE is no opposition so difficult to cope with as that which refuses to argue. If a man be full of wordy reasons to explain his course of action, it may be presumed that the reasons have done duty before, and in all probability to convince himself. If a player persistently withholds his best cards, it is difficult to discover whether one's own be better.

Claud Tyars was one of those men with whom it is impossible to engage in a hearty discussion. He admitted tacitly and calmly that every one had a right to his opinion,

and there the matter ended. That this opinion in no wise coincided with his own affected him but slightly, and he was moved by no desire to bring about a change.

I am not of course going to be so bold as to assert that he never changed his opinion—such an assertion would stamp him at once as an impossible being, no more human than the hero of a lady's novel—but if he did he managed the alteration quietly and circumspectly, as it is always best to do. If life is a kaleidoscope, as has been suggested by some one or other, it is a very large one, and in the changing colours we vary from pink to gray and rosy red to white. From the cradle to the grave we change and chop about like a yacht in a dead calm. To say that Claud Tyars held the same opinions all through his life would be a mere piece of folly, because it would lead the patient reader to the erroneous

belief that he was a creature of imagination, and not flesh and blood at all.

Now Miss Winter was a singularly discriminating little woman. Those clever gray eyes of hers saw most things, and passed on the observation to a quick brain to be pieced together and reduced, by a process of which the male intellect has no conception, to a reasonable deduction. She knew exactly what sort of man this was; the type is not uncommon. We all have run against it and trod on its toes, or felt its weight on ours, in many a British drawing-room. Miss Winter had encountered it also, and although each of us has his individuality, we belong also to a class or type, and this type generally asserts itself sooner or later. Miss Winter had some knowledge of this, and she was inclined to take Claud Tyars rather as a type than as an individual. She had found from experi-

ence that although each man may have an individual way of doing things, the net result of his actions is very much the same as that of the actions of other men of his species.

If we look round us we shall find that this lady was not so very far wrong. Take, for instance, the silent gentleman—the man whose manners are good, but negative. Take three of them. Call them, by way of being truly original, Brown, Jones, and Robinson. Look them up after a lapse of ten years. There is a Mrs. Brown, a Mrs. Jones, and a Mrs. Robinson. Brown, Jones, and Robinson all talk a little more than they did in their youth. A certain grand disregard for the details of existence has given way in all alike to a domesticated love of the poker, and a grave assumption of the cellular duties of butler. B., J., and R. are devoted to three quiet little women

of no great beauty, but remarkable for their amiability, and each for her devotion to B., J., and R. respectively; and this, mind you, will go on. Mrs. B. will continue to cherish her conviction that Brown is unrivalled among men; ditto Mrs. Jones towards J.; likewise Madam R. as regards Robinson.

How Brown won his wife, why Jones married that nice little woman, and where Robinson picked up his treasure, is not our business. Those details are doubtless individual enough, but the grand typical result is the same.

This method of treating men broadly is of course by no means infallible, but in the long run it will be found worthy of some attention. That Miss Winter had adopted it, is in itself a recommendation, for these clear-sighted and beautiful women, who move through society to its infinite advan-

tage, see considerably deeper into human nature than you and I, *mon ami*, with our keen eyes and fine male intellects.

She read Claud Tyars as one of those men who are unassailable to other men. His was a mind incapable of bowing to the will of another man, but to the will of a woman she knew him, or thought she knew him, to be pervious. From the very first she was antagonistic to these Arctic schemes. She looked upon all such deeds as pleasant pastimes for young men; just as the study of art or music is a pleasant pastime for young women until such time as they are called to assume the burthen of domestic life.

When a girl lays aside her pencil or closes her music to think about her bridesmaids' dresses, the pencil and the book are generally deposed for ever. The same rule applies in most cases to a young man's

ice-axe and Express rifle ; and it is not for us to cavil. We are told by a wiser man than any of us (were he a pessimist or no) that there is a time for everything. A middle-aged man is all the better for having been a climber, or a rower, or a big-game hunter in his youth. Although the pencil be laid aside, and the music-book be closed, art and music are not forgotten.

Miss Winter, therefore, attached no permanent importance to Claud Tyars' Arctic aspirations, but she recognized that a man may come to grief as readily on his first expedition as in his later ventures. She therefore determined that this scheme should not be carried out if she could manage to prevent it.

Whatever her feelings towards Oswin Grace may have been, she had another motive, namely, that Claud Tyars and Helen Grace were on the verge of loving each

other. The minutiae upon which this suspicion was based are too numerous and too complicated to give any hope of successful demonstration here. Women have more time to piece these small details than we have who are busy enough with more practical matters, and let it be confessed at once, they have greater ability. As yet it was a mere suspicion, and Miss Winter could not even decide whether they understood each other or not.

In view of her own position regarding Oswin, a younger woman would have held back, but Agnes Winter was made of different metal. She had no reason to fear the world's comment, and was quite ready to brave its opinion.

She rather admired Tyars for displaying a love of adventure, and secretly sympathized with his aims; but, being an eminently practical woman, she was of

opinion that it would be much more sensible for him to stay at home and marry Helen. The truth of it was that she had not hitherto met a man worthy, in her estimation, to be loved by her friend, and Claud Tyars had appeared on the scene at the right moment. At that moment, to be more explicit, when a girl first begins to find out that home is not all it used to be in earlier days, that a father and a father's love—excellent possessions as they are—have no power to satisfy a certain vague desire for something more exciting—more exhilarating.

The quiet passive gentlemanliness of this nineteenth-century adventurer pleased Agnes Winter's refined taste, and the knowledge that there was a power of action concealed behind the most self-contained of exteriors, interested her and aroused her curiosity. In a word, she admired Claud

Tyars, and admiration is a concession very rarely drawn from a woman by a man of her own generation. Love, if you will, friendship or toleration, but admiration rarely.

When the gentlemen entered the room and straggled across the broad carpet to the ladies of their choice, Miss Winter wondered whether there was a motive in Tyars' avoidance of Helen Grace. She was seated at the little low tea-table near the fire, dispensing the most fragrant tea and coffee, and it was perhaps only natural that she should attract more admirers than the other ladies.

There was, however, one cavalier who knew his own mind, and this was Matthew Mark Easton. He crossed the room without hesitation, and took a vacant seat beside Miss Winter with an air of decision which betrayed a previously-conceived intention.

“Miss Winter,” he said in his gravely-humorous way, “I manufactured an excellent joke during dinner about being left out in the cold, but somehow the powder has got a little damp, and the joke won’t go off. I had misgivings on the stairs as to the good taste of making a joke about a lady’s name.”

“I doubt,” she answered, “that even you could find an entirely new variety. At school I was called Spring, Summer, Autumn—anything but Winter.”

At this moment Tyars joined them, and the lady looked up with a smile which distinctly invited him to remain.

“Those school-girls,” said Easton, in his formal transatlantic gallantry, “showed considerable sense despite their tender years.”

Miss Winter received the compliment with an approving little nod which spoke of criticism.

“Very neat,” she said. “You remind me of Colonel Sames, your Minister, who is a finished master in the art of flattery.”

“Yes,” answered Easton. “Sames is a great diplomatist. He can do two things well. He can flatter vanity and baffle curiosity.”

As he spoke the last words, with a simplicity which was at times too perfect to be quite natural, he turned towards Claud Tyars, who stood listening, with a vague smile upon his face. The action was full of significance. It seemed to say that here was another man who could do these things. The quick-witted little lady read the significance of the action, and looked from one man to the other speculatively. She seemed to be occupied for some moments in seeking the points of affinity upon which their friendship could possibly have been built. It is rather an interesting study, but there

is a great danger in the pursuit of it, for one cannot help discovering sooner or later how very few real friendships there are in the world. Most of us can tell our friends upon the fingers of one hand.

At last, after a prolonged scrutiny of Claud Tyars, prosecuted with all the *aplomb* she was pleased to consider as attached to her years, she said to Easton in mock confidence—

“Can he do both?”

“I do not know,” was the prompt answer. “He has never flattered my vanity, but he baffles my curiosity every time I contemplate him.”

Tyars laughed, an easy and provokingly unconscious laugh. He did not deem it necessary to reply to their raillery, but his endurance of it was friendly and even encouraging.

“I should have thought that you knew him,” suggested Miss Winter.

Tyars turned towards Easton in a semi-interested way to hear the answer, but he was evidently more occupied with the group at the other end of the room, of which Helen formed the centre.

"I know him," replied the American in a queer way, as if he were not quite sure of being humorous, "as he knows the sea, from the surface only. A little penetration leads one no farther. There is a ruffled surface, or a smooth surface, as the case may be; then comes a great calm depth; beyond that there is something—*etwas*, *quelque-chose*, *qualque cosa* . . ."

He finished up with a little shrug of his narrow shoulders, eminently descriptive of ignorance and incapability of surmise.

Then Claud Tyars did rather a strange thing—a thing which many women would never have forgiven in another man. He wandered away from them towards the

group of which Helen formed the centre. He left his character behind him, as it were, for dissection, but he left it indifferently, unconcernedly, as a forgotten possession of no value. If he were possessed of vanity, he assuredly must have been flattered by this open interest displayed by Miss Winter; but there was no misreading his motive. There was no affectation of indifference, no cynical scepticism. He merely wandered away, absorbed in some other thought. It was absurdly obvious that he had something to say to Helen Grace, and he went off to say it. When this man had something to do or something to say, he had a singular way of saying or doing it, with a grand disregard for convenience.

“Then,” said Miss Winter, disregarding his departure, “the friendship of men must be different from that of women.”

“It is,” answered Easton with conviction.

“You are right there. The friendship of men is like some of the hard-wood trees we find out West. These trees are there, standing firm and strong, but they never grow an inch—and they never die. I surmise that they grew some time in Noah’s nine hundred and fifty years, and they have stood there since. A woman’s friendship is a soft-wood tree, that grows up a great height, and gets blown down by a gale of wind.”

Miss Winter laughed.

“But,” she said in self-defence, “one makes a great many things of soft wood.”

He bowed, with a deprecatory wave of his small slim hand.

“Miss Winter,” he said gravely, “all fruit trees are soft wood.”

She smiled vaguely, but did not meet his glance, which indeed was rather a difficult thing to meet, the movements of his eyes

being so very quick and uncertain. She was watching the endeavours of Claud Tyars to oust out sundry gallant old sailors and get Helen to himself for a moment. At last he either gave up the attempt as hopeless, or deemed it expedient to bide his time for he came back towards the elder lady carrying a cup of coffee, with a certain steadiness rarely found in the hands of men who have not been at sea.

“I am told,” he said, “that this is prepared according to your taste.”

“Thank you,” replied Miss Winter. “I have no doubt that it is delicious. Helen knows my peculiarities.”

“Talking of baffled curiosity,” said Tyars, in his peculiar direct way, “I positively dread those old gentlemen at the other end of the room. They are bubbling over with advice, inquisitiveness, and personal reminiscences.”

“Ah,” said Easton, in a conciliatory tone, “you must expect that sort of thing. From now until March your life will be a burthen to you. You will have to interview people from morning till night; men who have invented balloons; others with tin models of impossible ships; provision merchants, fresh fruit canners, old sailors, young sailors, the army, the navy, and the church. I expect,” he added gravely, “that Miss Winter will wait upon you with a selection of tracts.”

The lady mentioned was up in arms at once.

“Do you think that I am engaged in good works, Mr. Easton?” she inquired, innocently.

His quaint little face puckered up with amusement.

“I know it,” he answered.

“How?” with a quick glance of reproach towards Tyars.

“I have seen you in the St. Katherine’s Dock.”

“Indeed!—I never noticed you.”

“No,” he replied, calmly, “people do not notice me much. I guess I am insignificant.”

“How absurdly small the world is!” reflected the lady aloud.

“Yes,” assented the American, “it is certainly a little cramped.”

“However,” said Miss Winter, after a pause, “I do not think Mr. Tyars need be afraid of me or of my advice. I know very little about tracts, and absolutely nothing about Arctic affairs. I am afraid,” she added, deliberately, “that I do not take much interest in either.”

After this gratuitous stab she leant back and stirred her coffee thoughtfully.

Easton made no answer to this. He looked from one to the other in the sly, apprehensive way which had earned him

his sobriquet at school. He was rather at sea amidst the smaller politics of this household, for as yet he could only guess what Miss Winter's position in it might be. He did not know upon what footing his friend Claud Tyars had established himself, and he was keenly conscious of a subtle antagonism between these two clever people—the friend of the daughter and the friend of the son.

Nothing, however, was lost upon him. Nothing escaped his little eyes. He knew that Miss Winter would do precisely what she did when her coffee was stirred. She raised her eyes slowly and deliberately to Tyars' face, and he, looking down at her from his calm height, met the penetrating glance with an intelligence full of speculation.

Matthew Mark Easton saw all this and was puzzled. He was able to divine that there was some understanding between these two, but at the nature of this under-

standing he could not make the merest guess. It was not antagonism, nor yet was it Love. These are the two chief understandings that arise between men and women. And yet there was a gleam of something very like a warning in both pairs of eyes.

Each seemed to be saying to the other—
“Be careful. I know your secret. In this game I hold a better card than you!”





CHAPTER VII.

FOR THE LAST TIME.

IT sometimes suggests itself that we shall in the hereafter be required to answer for words as well as deeds. The ordeal will be decidedly unpleasant for the majority of us, but we shall hardly be able to cavil at injustice, for it is only right that those who suggest evil deeds by evil words should be brought to task for the result.

In the majority of instances, however, our words are considerably superior to our deeds. We talk, in fact, much more prettily than we act; and still more do we suggest by words the beauty of action

and the blessings of virtue in others. But there are words which go so far and achieve such distant results that although the responsibility is unquestionably great it is hard to say whether evil or good predominate in the influence exercised. There are some lives which have been entirely influenced by a word or a few words strung jingling together. These words are sometimes spoken by father or mother, sometimes by some great man, some cultivated stringer together of alliterations, sometimes they are spoken from the pulpit. But the influence of a sermon frequently fades away and leaves the text behind it. The words, or sayings, or mottoes that have influenced human lives have usually been remarkable for terseness. The saying must be light, the sense of it must be clear and sharp, it must strike one in the face, and there must be biting claws to cling to the memory.

When our forefathers looked round for some striking design of bird or beast or fish, to work upon their silken pennant, and casually asked a learned monk for a few words in Latin or French to write beneath it, I wonder if they foresaw the responsibility they were assuming! I wonder if they dreamt that in years to come, when their bones were mouldering beneath the moss-grown stones of a little country churchyard (for, mark you! those fellows rarely died in cities)—I say, I wonder if the dream ever came to them that the bearers of their name long after would look up to the motto upon the church wall and try to shape their lives according to it. Those words were a battle-cry then, and they are a battle-cry now. Our ancestors have much to do with our lives, much more than we think. A word or a name reaches into posterity. "*Noblesse oblige.*"

And in our modern every-day whirl of existence a chance word let fall here and there may take root somewhere, may find a chink in some mind, and slip in there nestling and concealing itself, but making very sure of its stronghold.

Claud Tyars was not an impressionable man ; indeed he was a singularly hard one. His self-sufficiency was not of the bragging order, nor of the aggressive. His habit was to think things out carefully, and then to stick to his decision. Nothing now could turn him from his scheme of rounding Cape Chelyuskin and rescuing the Siberian prisoners to whom his word was pledged.

He knew himself to be a determined man. The throes of indecision were quite unknown to him. But a few words spoken by Miss Winter rather worried him as he turned away and went towards Helen Grace to procure himself a cup of coffee.

He wondered why she had told him so deliberately that Arctic matters were totally without interest to her, and why her eyes had informed him with obvious intention that his schemes and plans were a bore.

It happened that after all he was permitted to have a few minutes of Helen's undivided attention. Having been provided with tea or coffee, the old gentlemen had left her to seek the repose demanded by their aged limbs for purposes of digestion.

Tyars promptly appropriated the only vacant seat near at hand.

Since the conversation which he had had with Helen in this same room there was an indefinite difference in their relationship. It was not only that difference which comes with an increasing familiarity, although it savoured of a greater ease. Tyars, who was by no means a voluble man, felt that he had to some extent explained himself; that he

had spoken a few at least of the difficult words which had tied his tongue. The mystery with which his movements had been surrounded was not of his own seeking, but the result only of necessity.

It thus came about that the two young people did not speak at once as partial strangers would have done, but sat in silence for some moments. During this space she handed him a filled cup which he acknowledged with a little nod of the head, and the movement of his heavy moustache betokened the framing by concealed lips of a word which remained inaudible.

“I am afraid,” he said at length, “that I am not popular this evening.”

“Do you covet popularity?” she asked, brightly.

“Not in the least.”

“And why do you fear that you are not popular to-night?”

“There are several old gentlemen dying to offer me advice, and I am not a sufficiently accomplished humbug to solicit it,” he replied, with a little laugh, “and,” he added, with sudden gravity, “Miss Winter has been snubbing me.”

Helen looked at him seriously. His placid gray eyes met hers with a little smile full of unconscious purpose, the eyes of a man who goes ahead.

“Yes,” he said, with a little nod, “I am beginning to find that the North Pole is further off than I thought it was.”

He had got so accustomed to consider his first expedition as a mere preliminary to a second having for its aim the North Pole, that his conscience passed over many little deceptions now without a pause.

Helen seemed to attach some importance to Miss Winter’s caprice.

“What did she say? was her next inquiry.

“She went out of her way to inform me that she considered me a bore with my Arctic expeditions.”

Helen looked puzzled, and gathered no hope of elucidation from the grave face before her. He did not seem to dream of offering any solution ; indeed the position he occupied was more that of an inquirer.

“Did Agnes,” she asked, at length, “say anything about Oswin ?”

“No ! Did you expect that she would ?”

“Scarcely,” she replied ; “but . . . but I should have preferred her to do so.”

He played meditatively with the small silver spoon lying in his saucer, and said nothing, leaving her in ignorance as to whether he detected a subtle meaning in her remark or not.

At this moment they were interrupted by a garrulous old gentleman who had been sent by his wife to procure her a second cup of

coffee as quietly and unobtrusively as possible. Tyars continued to amuse himself with the spoon until this docile husband had gone off jubilantly, then he looked up and spoke in an abrupt way which was habitual with him. He seemed almost to expect other people to follow out the same sequence of thought as himself.

“There is one rule, you know,” he said, “to which I adhere without exception. I take no man who has ties at home, no man who is married or engaged, no man upon whose labours any one is wholly or partially dependent.”

By way of reply Helen looked across the room towards her brother, and Tyars followed the direction of her glance. Oswin was talking interestedly enough with the plain daughter of an ugly admiral. Miss Winter was still engaged in lively converse with Matthew Mark Easton. The two

seemed quite content. Each ignored the presence of the other, completely and unaffectedly.

Now this pastime of watching from afar is full of teaching, for we usually learn from the result that we knew, after all, remarkably little of the proceedings. We are warned against false prophets, but most of us could fill a fair-sized volume with false prophecies about our neighbours.

It would seem that Claud Tyars was not disposed to waste much time in speculation. Perhaps he deemed that Miss Winter and Oswin Grace were quite capable of taking care of themselves—a really serviceable plan of action which I would recommend to old and young for practical every-day application. He ceased studying these persons from afar, and turned his attention to a more pleasing object which had the obvious advantage of proximity.

There are some people who need not seek among colours for a shade to suit them, for black does them greatest service. Very white arms and a graceful, rounded neck need never fear black, and girls possessing the slim strength of carriage which was so noticeable in Helen Grace cannot do better than cultivate sombreness of garb. Alas! most of them have, however, opportunity enough of finding this out for themselves.

Tyars' gaze, slow and thoughtful—the gaze that stores up food for the memory—continued to rest upon the girl until she became conscious of it.

“Oswin,” he then said, practically, “knows this. I made the rule in consultation with him. It is a desperately matter-of-fact and practical rule. No sentiment—it is not in our line.”

She laughed, unconcernedly enough.

“No. I have never known Oswin descend so low as that.”

It seems rather hard to realize that Claud Tyars had never known a girl so intimately as he now knew Helen Grace. He was sisterless, and his closest friend, Matthew Mark Easton, was no more fortunate. He had at one time “moved in society,” as the story-books have it, but we all know what that means—we all know that a girl puts on her evening dress and her evening manner at the same time. Men change with a change of clothes, but women are subject to a still greater alteration. The man who falls in love and does all his wooing in the ball-room, is to be pitied. He sees a girl at her best for the moment, and at her worst for a lifetime. Claud Tyars had made many ball-room acquaintances, and some had been continued in daylight, but he had never hitherto been

allowed an insight into the home life of an English girl. He had never up to now shared aught else than pleasure with one, and it is not in the participation of pleasure that we learn to know women best, and at their best.

The more fortunate possessors of sisters can hardly comprehend the position of a man like Claud Tyars, for a sister leads us to catch glimpses of human life from the feminine point of view ; and above all she has her friends. Look around you, and you will find that those men who were brought up with sister or sisters have made the best choice in wives. No man is any the worse for beginning life with the friendship of a woman. Some of our own friends, we must admit, have gone to the bad, and of course we utterly disclaim them now, the recollection of our former familiarity has quite vanished. We remember now

that we were never intimate with them, our eyesight is often defective when we meet in the street, and we are given to great pre-occupation when they stare deprecatingly. We give thanks inwardly that we are not as these publicans, and think comfortably of the tithes that we give, because we cannot help giving. You see therefore that we are exceedingly worthy beings, and consequently quite beyond reflection. We merely mention that some persons with whom in our callow youth we were slightly acquainted, have not realized their mothers' hopes, because we wish to seek out several peculiarities which may have influenced their downward career. These men, then, were not members of a mixed family. They had not played in a nursery with little girls, later on they had never been boy lovers to some long-haired fairy. They had not even been dancing men. Few

dancing men go to the bad. They may be muffs, fops, dandies, snobs ; but let us be just to them nevertheless.

Although Claud Tyars had been a social success—although he had been a renowned dancer, and never the victim of those little ball-room subterfuges which sting manly vanity very deeply, he had never been a ladies' man. He was actually in the habit, if you please, of treating ladies as if they thought earnest thoughts, as if they possessed reasoning powers, only differing from those of noble man so much as different environments rendered imperative. He had followed out this treatment so thoroughly that he had up to this time found but few members of the fairer sex in whom he could take the slightest interest. It was perhaps hardly a satisfactory view to hold, because there are not very many women who can bear successfully the treatment mentioned.

Claud Tyars had however encountered exceptions, and the most noticeable of them was undoubtedly the girl whom he had met by the merest accident at the Brasenose ball some years before. A girl who, in spite of being the best dancer in the room, was not as light in head as in foot; who was thoughtful as well as beautiful, independent without superiority, and perhaps just a little disdainful without being aware of it. He had not forgotten the peculiar sweeping line of delicate nose, and lips, and chin, which in some way suggested an old portrait. There was something Stuart-like in that face, with its softer lines in the girl, and the harder for the brother; something that recalled the days when men were content to die for a face, and loved to fight for no other reward than a smile from eyes that were fascinatingly sad.

This same face was before him now, and

it almost seemed as if he had looked on it every day since his Cambridge years. I wonder what it is, that strange sense of familiarity with certain faces and certain things which comes to us at times, and then fades away again without explanation.

Although at times Claud Tyars could be lively enough, his presence was calculated rather to lend thoughtfulness than hilarity to an assembly. The Creator has endued all large things with a solemnity which nothing that is small can ape. If the young hostess had reckoned upon Tyars as a guest likely to tell amusing anecdotes to select groups of old ladies, or even to keep one young lady in a constant ripple of laughter, she must have been disappointed. He was distinctly dull, overshadowed by a great pre-occupation, or labouring under some discomfiting thought.

He thanked her for the coffee in a grave

way, refused a second cup, and then sat replying in monosyllables to all her sparkling sallies. Occasionally he joined, ignorantly with a smile, in the laughter that reached them from the corner of the room where several guests had congregated around Miss Winter and Matthew Mark Easton; but it was quite plain that he had no idea of the joke, and was merely echoing.

At last there was a move on the part of the largest lady present to depart, and Claud Tyars rose promptly.

A general exodus followed, and Easton refused gaily for himself and Tyars, Oswin's invitation to stay and have a cigar. This delayed them a few moments, and they were thus the last to say good-bye.

While Easton was making a somewhat prolonged transatlantic speech to the admiral respecting his fine hospitality, Tyars found himself standing beside Helen

alone in the drawing-room, for Oswin had gone to seek cigars.

“I am afraid,” said Tyars, “that I have been a trifle duller than usual this evening. I am sorry.”

She laughed, and for a moment did not know what to say. She flushed slightly, and in the glowing light looked very lovely, as she said—

“I hope that does not mean that you have been bored.” There was no hint of coquetry in her question, and he answered it gravely enough.

“I do not know what it is to be bored.”

When the front door had been closed behind them, Tyars said to his companion, Matthew Mark Easton, without removing the cigar from his teeth—

“That door has closed behind me for the last time.”

“Why?” inquired the American.

“Because,” was the cool reply, “I prefer keeping out of number one hundred and five Brook Street.”





CHAPTER VIII.

MISS WINTER MOVES.

ON the evening of the Admirals' Club dinner, early in December, Helen had been in the habit of dining at the Winters'. Although Agnes Winter was now alone, she seemed singularly anxious to keep up this custom, and Helen acceded to her proposal readily enough. Oswin was easily disposed of. A sailor returning to London, after an absence of some years, can usually employ his evenings satisfactorily.

It happened that Miss Winter was absent from town during the three days preceding the anniversary, and Helen was therefore

left in ignorance as to the nature of the entertainment to which she was invited. It seemed probable that there should be other guests, and she provided for this contingency in the selection of her dress.

As she drove through the fog and gloom of December streets, the thought came to her, however, that had there been other guests her brother Oswin would, in the ordinary course of events, have been invited. This thought generated others; and before the little brougham drew up smoothly, the young girl was verging upon a conviction that the course of events had diverged already from the commonplace. She was not, therefore, surprised to see Miss Winter standing at the head of the brightly-lighted, softly-carpeted stairs to greet her. Before she spoke Helen had guessed that they were to pass the evening alone together, and as she mounted the

stairs she did her best to quell an indefinite feeling of discomfort. Now, when one looks forward with a feeling of discomfort to the prospect of passing an evening in the undisturbed society of one's dearest friend, it is more than probable that there is what is vaguely called something wrong. Two very commonplace, much-used, every-day words. Something—and—wrong. Yet place them together, and you will find the text of many a human life. You will find the preface to most human sorrows.

“Anything wrong, old fellow?”

“Yes; something wrong.”

What a ludicrously taciturn nation we are, after all! How many times have most of us heard the above words? How many times have we asked the question, or answered it? And how many times has the answer made its mark upon a whole life?

Miss Winter, however, was smiling and cheery.

“How are you, dear?” she said, fingering deftly her friend’s wraps. “So glad you have come! I was almost afraid the fog would stop you. I have only been home half an hour; just time to change my dress! Oh! you have got on your black tulle. I am so sorry I forgot to tell you that we should be quite alone. It is too cold to get up dinner-parties. We will have a cosy evening. Ann,” she added, to the staid and elderly maid, “let us have dinner at once.”

During the *tête-à-tête* meal Miss Winter entertained her friend with a lively description of the visit to a country house which had just terminated. The usual sort of thing—a dance, some private theatricals, and the bewildering society of one young man who had written a book, and of

another who was going to write one some day. She was not really cynical, this little lady. She could afford to lay aside that arm, which is at its best but a temporary weapon, soon losing its edge; but this evening she was inclined to be a trifle severe. She seemed to be labouring under a necessity of talking and laughing at any price.

The literary lions were fleeced mercilessly, the amateur actors were criticized as if they had been attempting to make money by their performance, and the dancing of the local swains was held up to scathing ridicule.

“You can imagine how hard I was pressed, my dear,” she said, as they went up-stairs together after dinner, “when I tell you that I was forced to tear my shoe—a thing I have only done once before, at Woolwich Academy, in the heyday of my early youth.”

Helen laughed, where laughter seemed appropriate, and commiserated freely.

The drawing-room looked intensely cosy. Miss Winter had been an early upholder of lamps, when gas first began to go out of favour in London drawing-rooms. One huge lamp—a soft yellow circle of light, supported by a long ornamented silver pillar with Corinthian flutings, the whole no thicker than a walking-stick, stood upon the table in the centre of the room. Two arm-chairs, and two only, small and low, were drawn forward to the fire, and between them a small table, promising coffee.

In response to a little gesture of the hand Helen took possession of one of the chairs. Miss Winter took up an evening newspaper, of which the careful cutting betrayed no tampering on the part of a literary cook, and slowly unfolded it.

“I want,” she said, “to see who is acting

in that new piece at the Epic. I had a note from Oswin to-day, proposing to make up a party for next Wednesday."

"Yes; he spoke to me about it. I should like to go."

Miss Winter continued to unfold the paper with a considerable bustle. She was not looking at it but at Helen, who seemed interested in the texture of an absurd little lace handkerchief.

"Who—is going?"

The girl raised her head and frowned slightly, as if making a mental effort.

"Let me see—papa, Oswin, you, myself, and—and—oh yes! Mr. Tyars."

Miss Winter had succeeded at last in finding the theatrical column, and studied the closely-printed lines for some time attentively. There was a little clock upon the mantel-piece, which presently gathered itself together with an officious whirr, and

struck nine. It seemed desirous of drawing attention to its own industry, for it ticked more loudly and aggressively after the effort.

Helen sat looking at it as if wondering that it should dare to break the somewhat heavy silence. She had her back turned towards the lamp, but the fire had fallen together a few minutes before, and there was a single bright flame leaping and falling spasmodically. This lighted up her face, and betrayed the presence of a drawn, anxious look in her eyes. She made a little shrinking movement with her shoulders, and glanced furtively back towards her companion. Miss Winter had dropped the newspaper on the floor. She had approached, and was standing close beside the girl.

“Helen—!”

It was almost a gasp. The girl seemed

to make an effort, but she succeeded in smiling.

“Yes—dear.”

Miss Winter was not an impulsive woman. There was a graceful finish and sense of leisure about her movements, but before Helen could move, her friend was kneeling on the white fur hearthrug drawing her towards her, forcing her to face the light.

“Helen ! let me see your face !”

It was almost a command, and the girl obeyed, slowly turning. Her eyes were dull, as if with physical agony.

Miss Winter relinquished the warm soft fingers. She half turned, and sat with her hands clasped in her lap, gazing into the fire.

“When—” she asked, “when was it ? Long ago at Oxford, or only just lately ?”

“I suppose,” Helen answered, quietly,

“that it was long ago at Oxford; but—but I think I did not know it.”

This daughter of a sailor race was not given to tears, but now her lashes were glistening softly. It is not the bitterest tear that falls.

“My poor, poor Helen!” murmured Miss Winter, stroking her friend’s hand gently.

Helen replied by a sickening little laugh.

“It is a little awkward, is it not?” she said.

A wince of pain passed across the elder woman’s face.

“And he—” she asked, at length, “Claud Tyars—he has said nothing?”

“Of course not.”

Miss Winter’s eyes fell on the newspaper lying open at her feet. Mechanically she read the heading of a long article on the “New Arctic Expedition.” Her heart sank within her.

“But, Helen,” she whispered, “do you think he—”

“Hush, dear,” interrupted the girl. “Don’t ask me that.”

Then there followed a long silence, while these two gracious women sat hand in hand. We know, we who have passed through the mill, that sorrow is not the exclusive inheritance of the poor. Sorrow is a little thing. It is intangible—it is a shadow. And it creeps through fine-wrought key-holes, up soft-carpeted stairs, through silken curtains. It nestles upon the finest, whitest pillows. It sits with diamonds upon the fairest breasts.

In this warmly-curtained room where every chair, every curtain, every minutest ornament was an expression of taste and comfort, where two fair women sat clad in silk and fine linen, sorrow hovered in the air. For are we not told that it is our

inheritance? And there is nothing so sure as heredity. I know a woman whose father died mad. She wriggles and twists beneath the ban of heredity. She tries to persuade herself that she is not her father's daughter, she even laughs at her own fears. She accounts glibly for her own mental sensations, she welcomes with thirsty heart all instances where the curse of the father has not been visited upon the children. But does she think that she will escape? Most assuredly not! And from a disinterested point of view it seems probable that she is right. Whatever she may have lived in the way of a life, her death will be that of her father's daughter.

That is but one instance. She is an exceptional and an unfortunate heiress. But if there is one thing certain on earth, it is that we all have an inheritance. We cannot wriggle out of it, we cannot twist

it aside. We read of sorrow—we hear that our grandmothers and grandfathers dabbled in it, and the fact lends to them a pleasantly romantic interest. But do we realize that as surely as they dabbled shall we dabble? Or we may wade knee-deep in it. We may sink and be overwhelmed. We are like soldiers going out to battle. Private Smith may fall—a bullet may find its billet in the brain of Major Jones! But Private I—Major Me—no, the idea is too absurd! To lapse once more into egotism. We are told that a friend has been killed by the fall of a heavy block from aloft. “Poor fellow,” we think, “but what a fool not to get out of the way!” Now we should have got out of the way! *Toilà!* Are we not like that?

Miss Winter was the first to speak. This had not taken her by surprise, but our mind very often takes a little time to digest a

fact in which there was no surprise. Of course she had known before, but there was a difference now. It had not been a misfortune before—and now it was simply the greatest misfortune that could have come. For she knew Claud Tyars now, and she knew that such a man was far beyond her influence—that he would go on this expedition if he tore his own heart in two in so doing. She attributed this to his nature. It was merely the indulgence of a passion, the satisfaction of a singular sense of resolution and grim determination. She was, of course, ignorant of the other motive, of the real object of Tyars' expedition. That was cleared up afterwards—years afterwards when it was too late to make any difference. Mark this last-named detail—it is characteristic of most earthly elucidations.

“And you want to go on Wednesday?”

inquired Miss Winter, with a dawning wonder in her tone.

“Yes; I want to go—very much, Agnes.”

There was a spell of silence, after which Miss Winter spoke as much to herself as to her companion.

“I cannot understand that,” she said; “I should have thought that you would have preferred not going.”

“So should I,” replied the girl, in a voice which crisped her listener’s face with pain, “of any one else. But when—it is oneself—one thinks quite differently—I find.”

Again she finished her sentence with a nauseating little laugh, so utterly miserable was it.

There are some sorrows which are sorrows at once. They spring into existence in all their crude development, and there is no possibility of mistaking them. Others

develop slowly—it is uncertain whether they will turn out to be sorrows or not, although as things go the chances are by no means even. And somehow these two women seemed to take it for granted that this love which had forced its way into Helen's heart was a thing of tears.

“Is it not much better,” urged Miss Winter, practically, “to avoid seeing him?”

Helen shrugged her shoulders before replying.

“Why? What is the good of it? It is not as if there were any chance of my—I mean—Agnes—you know that it will never be any different with me.”

“Still,” said the woman of the world, “I should avoid him. Do not ask him to the house.”

“You need not fear that. He will never come to Brook Street again.”

Miss Winter looked sharply round.

“How do you know that?” she asked.

“I could see it. He made it obvious enough when he said good-bye to papa and to me—the other night.”

“Then, Helen,” said the elder woman with conviction, “he did it on purpose, and if he did it on purpose . . .” She stopped, arrested by a glance from the girl’s soft, thoughtful eyes.

“It is either a misfortune or a crime,” she added, sadly.

“It is a misfortune.”

Miss Winter was not, however, the sort of woman to admit that.

“No,” she said; “I do not see why.”

The girl turned on her sharply.

“How can it be anything else?” in a hard, heart-broken voice.

“It might be,” persisted Agnes Winter; “it would be with any man but Claud Tyars, with any girl but you! As it is . . .”

“As it is,” echoed Helen, taking advantage of a pause, “he will go, and if he comes back he will go again until—until he does not come back. And I—I suppose I shall muddle on with Clothing Clubs and Girls’ Friendly Societies, and the Church Extension. I shall wear unbecoming bonnets and thick boots; shall brush my hair back very tight, and polish my face with soap. I shall develop into an intensely energetic and talkative middle-aged female, whose existence or non-existence is a matter of perfect indifference to all the world excepting a few other energetic and talkative middle-aged females. Ha, ha! No, Agnes, dear; don’t look so solemn. It is all right. I shan’t take to unbecoming good works. It will all come right in the end. These things always do—at least we say they do, which comes to the same thing. It does not make any

difference so the brightest side must be kept turned towards the outside world. I wish you would give me some tea. It has been standing under that elegant cosy ever since we came up. I wonder why no one has invented a cosy yet which is anything but absolutely hideous."

Miss Winter rose from her humble position on the hearthrug. She was still lithe and supple, this daughter of the great city, despite the gracious roundness of her form. She obeyed Helen's request, pouring out the tea in thoughtful silence ; but she failed to smile at her friend's gaiety. Gaiety, you see, is not always a thing to smile at. Laughter is not always a sign of joy.

She was thinking deeply. This lady had upon most things very decided opinions. She was, as already stated, somewhat in the habit of treating individual men as representatives of a type, and in the same

spirit she met the difficulties of life. She maintained that there was in most circumstances a wrong thing to do and a right. Moreover, she invariably made it her aim to set about, practically and methodically, finding the right.

“Helen,” she said, “will you tell me one thing?”

The girl moved uneasily, keeping her eyes averted.

“I think not,” she answered; “you can ask it, but I do not think that I will answer.”

“Long ago,” murmured the low voice of the elder woman, “long ago at Oxford did you think—Helen, forgive my asking—did you think that he loved you?”

There was a long silence, broken only by the officious little clock upon the mantelpiece and the heated creak of the glowing cinders. Then at last the answer came.

“No—no, certainly not. But he was different from the others—quite different. It seems ridiculous, but at the time I thought that it was because he was a Cambridge man.”

“Then if you had not met again this would not have happened.”

“No,” answered Helen, gravely ; “it would not. I wonder why Oswin should have saved *him*, of all men, in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Now I must go, Agnes. It is ten o’clock.”





CHAPTER IX.

A SERMON.

ON this same day Oswin Grace dined with Claud Tyars at his club. It was in this manner that he disposed of his unoccupied evening.

During the actual meal, served in a tall, hushed, and rather lonesome room, by a portentous gentleman in red plush breeches and pink stockings, there was not much opportunity for private conversation. A few friends of Tyars came at intervals and stopped to exchange some words before sitting down at their own particular table. There was about all these gentlemen a

similar peculiarity, namely, a certain burliness of chest and flatness of back. They had one and all been boating men in their time. They did not boast of many honours, nor possessed many degrees among them, but most of them had been in the "Boat" in their time, and some of them were "strokes" as well as Claud Tyars.

After dinner the two men lounged up the broad staircase to the smoking-room. There were two vast chairs near a secondary little fireplace at the far end of the room, and to these Tyars led the way.

There is nothing like a cigar, coupled with a club chair, to conduce to pleasant meditation. Oswin was inclined to be merry, but Tyars made no attempt to conceal his pre-occupation. He had naturally much to think of, and it had as yet not been noticed among his colleagues how strictly he kept matters in his own hands.

About the ship and her crew, her outfit and her capabilities, he consulted his subordinate freely enough, but as Easton had once remarked, the executive was wholly in his own hands. He saw personally to every detail, made all purchases, gave all orders; and everything was done in a matter-of-fact and business-like manner which showed great powers of organization.

Although the two men were by now quite familiar friends, there were certain phases in Claud Tyars' character which were as unintelligible to Oswin Grace as they had been months before on board the *Martial*. The young lieutenant still confessed freely that Claud Tyars was a "rum fellow." One generally finds a statement of this description tantamount to an admission of inferiority. It is just possible that Tyars had chosen this young sailor to aid him in his tremendous enterprise on

account of that same inferiority. Men who are born to command and love commanding are usually found in association with such as are obviously inferior to them. In some cases the selection is instinctive, in others it is deliberate; but Claud Tyars had unconsciously set his choice upon this man, knowing him to be a good sailor, a bold navigator, and an able officer. The choice had been made very quickly, with that strange haste which almost amounts to impetuosity, and which usually characterizes the action of prominent and successful men. Tyars was not conscious of his own strength, and did not therefore choose Oswin Grace because he was of weak will and easily led.

The elder man was the first to break the silence. He removed the cigar from his lips and watched the fire burn while he spoke.

“You have not,” he said, interrogatively, “got leave from the Admiralty yet?”

“Not yet,” was the answer returned confidently. Grace evidently anticipated no difficulty.

“Then don’t do it.”

The little square-shouldered man sat up, but Tyars bore with perfect equanimity the glance of a remarkably direct pair of eyes.

“What the devil do you mean, Tyars?”

“Don’t you think that you had better stick to brass-buttons and slave-catching?”

For once there was a lack of conviction in his voice.

“No, I don’t!” replied the other, with plenty of conviction. He was leaning back again in the deep chair; but his bronzed face wore a singular gray colour, while his gaze never swerved from his companion’s features.

“What is it?” he continued in a quieter voice? “my seamanship;”

“No,” replied Tyars, “that is a matter of history. It was your seamanship that brought the *Martial* home. Every one recognizes that.”

“Then,” said Grace, illogically, “let me go as A.B.”

Tyars laughed.

“I do not think,” he said, “that you ought to go at all. You must feel it yourself, and now is the time to draw back—before it is too late.”

“My dear man—I don’t feel it, and I don’t want to draw back.”

Grace was smiling now. Things were not so serious as they had at first appeared. He was still waiting for Tyars’ reason. He knew that his whilom chief was not the man to change his mind without strong motives, and already he pictured himself relegated to a lower position on board the Arctic vessel.

“Why,” he asked, “do you want to get rid of me?”

“I don’t want to get rid of you. There is no man afloat whom I would put in your place. But I must be consistent. I have refused many good men for the same reason. You have too many—home ties.”

Grace found time to relight his cigar, and the match illuminated rather a flushed face.

“What do you mean?” he asked at length, in a voice rendered unconscious with only partial success.

It was an awkward question, for Tyars had been assured by this man’s sister that there existed a distinct understanding between him and Miss Winter.

He was not an adept at prevarication.

“You see,” he said, awkwardly, “I am quite alone in the world. I have no one to sit at home and worry over my absence or my silence. I should like all the fellows

who go with me to be in the same circumstances."

A somewhat prolonged silence followed—the stately silence of a club-room, with padded doors and double windows. The two men smoked meditatively. I wonder how many lives have been made or marred over a cigar!

"I suppose," said Grace at length, "that Helen has been getting at you."

Tyars was to some extent prepared for this, but he moved rather uneasily in his luxurious chair.

"No," he answered, "you know your sister better than to think that. She is not that sort of woman."

Oswin Grace smiled. He was rather proud of his sister. She was, he opined, the sort of sister for a sailor to have. Not a fretting, high-strung girl, but cool and self-contained and strong—a fair sweet

sample of that most enduring of woman-kind, an English lady. Tyars' words conveyed a compliment, manly and terse, such as a gentleman may permit himself to imply in the presence of a brother.

"Then," he said, cheerfully, "if Helen does not mind it is no one else's affair."

"How do you know," asked Tyars, "that she does not mind?"

"You have just said so."

"Never."

"Then what did you say, or mean to say?"

"I meant," replied the elder man, "that I never asked her whether she would mind or not, and therefore do not know."

"You merely told her that I was going."

Tyars nodded his head, and smoked with some enthusiasm.

"And—?"

"And she did not say in what way it

would affect her ; only suppose we are away two years—suppose we don't come back at all. Your father is an old man—she will be alone in the world.”

Oswin Grace stroked his neatly-cropped beard thoughtfully.

“Helen,” he said at length, “will marry.”

Like most big men Tyars possessed the faculty of sitting very still. During the silence that followed this remark, he might have been hewn of solid stone, so motionless was he as to limbs, features, and even nerves. At length he moistened his lips and turned his slow gaze to meet that of his companion, who was sitting forward in his chair awaiting the effect of this argument. There was a waiter arranging the newspapers on a table near at hand, and before replying Tyars ordered coffee.

“Yes,” he said, “that is probable, and she always has her friend—Miss Winter.”

Oswin Grace relapsed suddenly into the chair.

“Yes,” he said, “she will always have Agnes Winter, and if she married, her friendship would be only the more useful.”

That settled it. Claud Tyars gave a little sigh of relief, and helped himself to coffee.

“Shall I,” he said, “put sugar in yours?”

“Yes, please.”

“Two lumps?”

“Two small ones,” replied Grace.

They discussed this question just as gravely as the other.

Then, when the waiter had withdrawn, Tyars returned to the original subject of the conversation.

“Of course,” he said, “if you feel quite free from the slightest moral obligation, I have nothing more to say.”

“Thank you,” replied Oswin Grace, with relieved cheeriness; “that is exactly how I

feel. But, old fellow, I wish you would give me notice when you feel a fit like that coming on. It gave me a beastly fright. Quite a turn, as my washerwoman said, when she saw my shirt-cuff covered with red paint."

There was evidently not the slightest afterthought. Oswin was genuinely enthusiastic, and showed it—showed it, in fact, much more than did Claud Tyars, who was essentially a son of this nineteenth century, where enthusiasm is hardly known. Enthusiasm about evil things is not desirable, but it would at least show sincerity. We cannot even go to the dogs with enthusiasm nowadays. Tyars may have been honest enough in his intention to give his subordinate a chance of withdrawing, but it is probable that he never recognized the possibility of such an action on the part of Oswin Grace. A man capable of doing so was

certainly not the person to select for the work that lay before them.

They now lapsed into mere technicalities, which will not bear setting down here. There are some people who disapprove of Arctic expeditions, but there are also persons who withhold their approval of mountaineering and of football. If this volume fall into the hands of any such, I bow most meekly. Heavens forbid that they should be persuaded to do any of these things! To play football, for instance, on my side; to climb a snow-slope in front of me; to have anything whatever to do with the navigation of an Arctic vessel with myself on board—Heavens forbid that I should uphold in wordy contest the taking of a part in any of these ventures! But it may be pointed out that those who do so know what they are about. The risks and the chances are infinitely better known to them.

than they are to literary folk and mere newspaper pesterers. If, knowing the risk so well, certain persons choose to run it—*mon Dieu!* whose business is it?

These young men are not held up as heroes because they were pleased to risk the only life they possessed (or were likely to possess) on a hair-brained scheme for relieving the misery of the most pitiable body of people on the face of the earth. It is not for us to say whether they did right or wrong.

Of course their design was a deliberate breach of the law; but it was the law of another country, and we all know that the laws of a foreign country are a mere joke; a series of quips and cranks compiled for the amusement of travellers, and in no way binding upon Englishmen. This, at all events, appears to be the view generally taken by our countrymen abroad.

There is, however, a higher law than that of nations—the Law of Humanity. We Britons at one time set an example in the application of this law, but we have now other things to attend to. The whole world indeed must have its hands full, or else its vastest nation would never be allowed to cast an indelible stain upon this century and generation. We get up subscriptions and we write huge letters to the newspapers about atrocities, Bulgarian, Cretan, and other. Well-intentioned men dispute continuously and fruitlessly as to whether certain objects seen on the banks of a certain river were the remnants of a haystack or the remains of a crucified man.

Atrocities seek you? They are not far. There is a very comfortable train from Charing Cross at eleven o'clock in the morning which will land you at the railway-station at St. Petersburg in about fifty

hours. For sixty kopecks you can drive in a really luxurious droseky straight down the Newski Prospect and past the Admiralty. There from the English quay you can look on one of the great atrocities of the day, namely, the fortress of St. Peter and St. Paul. That same evening at half-past eight you can take a train on to Moscow, and after a short drive over cobble-stones now instead of wood, as in the Prospect, you can look on atrocity number two—the House of Preliminary Detention. And these are but introductions to the great atrocity of Siberia.

Even in bygone days, before the ages were illumined, political prisoners were treated with some sort of respect. They were never herded with the common felon, the fratricide, the murderer, the thief. We have only come to that in these later days, this enlightened nineteenth century. But this is no place to set down so-called

sensational details. This is no political pamphlet, and the writer is no Nihilist. But surely there are some Englishmen who find time to study this great question ; some who know that a Nihilist is not a Terrorist, nor a Socialist, nor an Atheist, but merely, if you please, a politician—a man who loves his country sufficiently well to risk all for her sake. In all changes there is a time when crime is turned to heroism. To-day the Nihilists are criminals, some day they will be heroes. To-day Nihil merely represents the fruit that they gather from their seed, but in times to come one cannot help hoping that there will be a mighty harvest. And then perhaps the gatherers—the new Russian nation that will spring up and flourish from the ashes of the old autoeracy—will remember those who sowed in tears and tribulation ; will remember those nameless thousands of men and women who have

died in solitary cell, in dripping darksome mine, in prison-hospital, and on the great road to Siberia.

In England the whole question of the future of Russia is as little studied as its present state is known. Nihilism at present is a subject to write novels about—the dramatic side of it alone is brought before the public; and consequently the cause of Progression, ay, the cause of personal freedom, each man's birthright, is treated as a huge fiction. A few read the sparse books here and there written by Russians who are in deadly earnest, but fewer still take it as it is, namely, a downright practical fact. It is a great fight, and though the picturesque part of it only is presented in fiction, just as the picturesque side of Poland was a few years ago turned into fictional capital, there is another—the earnest steady pressing forward of an ever-increasing party of men

and women who daily make stupendous sacrifices for the cause that binds them together.

The picturesqueness requires distance. One must contemplate the drama to appreciate its force, and take no part in it. It is very thrilling and very picturesque to conjure up in the mind's eye a gloomy cell, with glistening walls and a wooden bed, without even a handful of straw; but the denizen of that cell fails to see the dramatic force of it all. There is a certain excitement in imagining a snow-covered plain traversed by one dirty, deeply-rutted road, and to set thereon a string of miserable beings, dragging one leg after another—their backs turned towards home and all they love, their horror-stricken eyes looking on hopeless exile. But there is no excitement in standing at the edge of that road and watching with living eyes those same poor human

beings in the flesh. There is no dramatic thrill in standing at the side of a miserable pallet infested with vermin, reeking with damp, and watching the last throes of a repulsive heap of dirt and rags which was once a comely, fair young girl. And these are realities, they are no sensational details. The details of Siberian prison life and exile life are not sensational—they are merely beastly.





CHAPTER X.

MISS WINTER DIVERGES.

“MY DEAR OSWIN,
“If you want to carry out this theatre-party, come and see me about it. I shall be at home all the morning.

“Yours very truly,

“AGNES WINTER.”

The young sailor read this letter among others at the breakfast-table. His father and sister were engaged on their own affairs ; Helen with her letters, the admiral among his newspapers. Oswin Grace read the letter twice, and then with a glance to see

that he was unobserved by his sister, he slipped it into his pocket together with the envelope that had contained it.

“Have you,” said Helen, immediately afterwards, “a letter from Agnes?”

“Yes,” he replied, opening a second missive with airy indifference. “She wants me to arrange about the theatre. I shall go round and see her this morning—will you come with me?”

The girl raised her eyebrows almost imperceptibly. There had been a time when he would have schemed unscrupulously to go alone.

“I am afraid,” she answered, quietly, “that I cannot go out this morning. I have so much to do in the house.”

“You had better come.”

“If you will put it off to this afternoon I should like to,” she replied.

“No; I am engaged this afternoon.”

“Where?” inquired the admiral without raising his eyes from the newspaper.

“At the docks—with Tyars.”

There was nothing more said, and at eleven o'clock Oswin went out alone. The fog and gloom of late November had given place to a bright, dry cold, and this, with out any great fall in the thermometer, now held complete sway over mud and water.

Miss Winter's elderly maid-servant evidently expected Lieutenant Grace, for she opened the door and stood back invitingly. Then when he was in the hall unbuttoning his thick pilot coat, she informed him that Miss Agnes was out, but was to return in a few moments. He was ushered up into the warm, luxurious drawing-room, and after the door had been closed, stood for a few moments irresolute in the middle of the deep carpet. Presently he began to wander about the room, taking things up and setting

them down again. He inhaled the subtle atmosphere of feminine home refinement and looked curiously round him. There were a hundred little personalities, little inconsidered feminine trifles that are only found where a woman is quite at home. The very arrangement of the room proved that it was a woman's room, that a woman lived her every-day life there, and set her indefinable subtle stamp upon everything. There was a silly little lace handkerchief, utterly useless and vain, lying upon a table beside a work-basket. He took it up, examined its texture critically, and then instinctively raised it to his face. He threw it down again with a peculiar twisted smile.

“Wonder what scent it is,” he muttered. “I have never come across it—anywhere else.”

He went towards the mantel-piece ; upon it were two portraits — old photographs,

somewhat faded. One of Helen, the other of himself. He examined his own likeness for some moments.

“Solemn little beggar,” he said, for the photograph was of a little square-built midshipman with a long oval face. “Solemn little beggar ; wonder what his end will be ? Wonder why he is on this mantel-piece ?”

Then he continued his mental inventory, stopping finally on the hearthrug with his back turned towards the fire, his hands thrust into the side-pockets of his short blue serge jacket.

“I think,” he reflected aloud, “that I was rather a fool to come here. Tyars would not like it.”

While he was still following out the train of thought suggested by this reflection the door opened and Miss Winter entered. She had evidently just come in, for she was still gloved and furred.

“Ah!” she said, gaily; “you have come. I was afraid that your exacting commander would require your services all the morning.”

“My exacting commander,” he answered, as he took her gloved hand in his, “has a peculiar way of doing everything himself and leaving his subordinates idle.”

She was standing before him slowly unbuttoning her trim little sealskin jacket. Then she drew off her gloves and threw them down on a chair beside her jacket. There was about her movements that subtle sense of feminine luxury which is slightly bewildering to men unaccustomed to English home-life. The cold bright air had brought a glow of colour to her rounded cheeks; she might easily have been a lovely girl of twenty-one. But there was a fascination in her which was equal to that of youth, if not superior—the fascination of perfect self-

possession, of perfect *savoir-faire*. She seemed singularly sure of herself, quite certain as to what she was going to say or do next. She seemed to know how to make the best of life, how to laugh in the right places, and work and play ; and perhaps she knew how to love if she set her mind that way.

“The delicate daughter,” she said, cheerily, “of the genial milkman has been suddenly taken worse. I knew that meant jelly, so I took it round at once with last week’s *Graphic*, and got it over. I hope I have not kept you waiting?”

“Oh, no ; thanks,” he replied.

It almost seemed that he was not quite at ease with his old playmate—the companion of his childhood, the little sweetheart of his “Britannia” days. If this was so the change was all on his side, for she persistently treated him with that sisterly

familiarity which has led so many of us into mistakes that might be ludicrous if they only did not leave such a nasty sting behind them.

She approached the mirror above the mantel-piece, and in continuance of her sisterly treatment, proceeded placidly to draw out the long pins from her hat, while he watched the deft play of her fingers.

"I have been wandering round the room," he continued, resolutely turning away, "looking for old friends."

"You have scarcely been in this room," she said, without looking round, "since you came back."

"No-o-o ! I found a little thimble in the top of your work-basket. Do you remember how we used to make indigestible little loaves of bread and cook them in a thimble over the gas ?"

"Yes," she laughed, "it is the same thimble. It fits me still."

She held up for his edification a small dimpled hand with clever capable little fingers bent coquettishly backwards. He gave a short laugh, and took no notice of the tempting fingers. Then, having removed her hat, she knelt down in front of the fire to warm herself.

“What,” she said suddenly, “about this expedition?”

He looked back at her over his shoulder, for he had gone towards the window, and there was a sudden gleam of determination in his eyes. It was her influence that had disturbed Tyars’ resolution.

“What expedition?” he asked, curtly, on his guard.

“This theatre expedition,” she replied, sweetly.

“Oh, well; I suppose it will be carried through. We all want to go.”

“We—all?” she said, inquiringly.

He came nearer to her, standing actually on the hearthrug beside her and looking down.

“Helen,” he explained, “and Tyars, and myself, and Easton, I believe.”

She gave a little nod at the mention of each name, tallying them off in her mind.

“And,” he continued, “I suppose you are not strongly opposed to it?”

“I,” she laughed lightly; “of course I want to go. You know that I am always ready for amusement, profitless or otherwise—profitless preferred! Why do you look so grave, Oswin? Please don’t—I hate solemnity. Do you know you have got horribly grave lately? It is . . .”

“It is what, Agnes?”

He was looking down at her with his keen, close-set gray eyes, and she met his glance for a moment only.

“Mr. Tyars,” she answered, clasping

her fingers together and bending them backwards as if to restore the circulation after her cold walk.

“There is something,” said Grace, after a little pause, during which Miss Winter had continued to rub a remarkably rosy little pair of hands together, “that jars. Tyars annoys you in some way.”

Miss Winter changed colour. She looked very girlish with the hot blush fading slowly from her cheeks. She did not however make any answer.

“What is it?” asked Grace. “His energy?”

“No-o,” slowly, with a faint suggestion of coquetry.

“His gravity?”

“No.”

“His independence?”

“I like men to be energetic, grave, and independent. All men should be so.”

“Then what is it?” asked Oswin.

She made no answer.

“Won’t you tell me, Agnes?” he urged; and as he spoke he walked away from her and stood looking out of the window. They were thus at opposite sides of the room, back to back. She glanced over her shoulder, drew in a deep breath, and then spoke with an odd little smile which was almost painful. One would almost have thought that she was going to tell a lie.

“His Arctic expeditions,” she said, deliberately. “If he is going to spend his life in that sort of thing I would rather—not—cultivate—his friendship.”

She leant forward, warming her hands feverishly, breathing rapidly and unevenly. She felt him approach, for his footsteps were inaudible on the thick carpet, and she only crouched a little lower. At last, after a horrid silence, he spoke, and his voice

was quite different; it was deeper and singularly monotonous.

“Why should you not wish to cultivate his friendship under those circumstances?”

“Because,” she answered, lamely, “I should hate to have a friend of mine—a real friend—running the risk of such a horrible death.”

He walked away to the window again and stood there with his hands thrust into his jacket-pockets—a sturdy, square little man—a plucky, self-contained Englishman, taking his punishment without a word. He was, as has been stated, rather ignorant in the ways of women. Most naval men are. And he fell into the trap blindly. He was actually foolish enough to believe that Agnes Winter loved Claud Tyars, and he was ignorant enough to believe that a woman ever tells one man of her love for another. It seems almost incredible

that he should do this. It is only men who make such mistakes as regards human nature.

As a man of honour he had carefully schooled himself to show this lady by every action, word, and gesture that if he had at one time been moved to regard her with other than the eyes of a brother, that time was passed. This was the least he could do in honour towards her, in faith towards Claud Tyars. Whether he succeeded or not could only be known to Agnes Winter herself. But, to judge from the expression of his face, from the contracted pain of his eyes as he stood looking down into the quiet street, it would seem that he had not been prepared to hear from her own lips that this woman, whom he had loved all his life, loved another man. The news, coming suddenly as it did, almost threw him off his mental equilibrium. This nauseating sense

of unsteadiness in a great purpose is probably not quite unknown to the majority of us. It is so easy to make up one's mind to a noble sacrifice and to give entire attention to the larger duties attending on it. Then comes some sudden unforeseen demand upon our self-suppression; sometimes it is almost trivial, and yet it leaves us shaken and uncertain.

Oswin remembered the jealous pangs with which he first saw these two together. Subsequent events had disarmed his jealousy and allayed his fears. Even now he could not realize what she had told him. And yet he was mad enough to believe it. Moreover, he continued to believe it. It was only at a subsequent period that he began to doubt and to analyze, and then it was clear enough to him. It was clear that in implying she had in no way committed herself. He had understood her to confess

that she was on the verge of falling in love with this nineteenth-century knight-errant, and yet she had made no such confession. It is probable that in that later season he remembered the words and not the manner of saying them. For, after all, the most important thing is not what we say, but how we say it. Do we not say every day the same trivial things that were said in Pompeii? Do we scribblers not write the same silly old story over and over again? Do we not smear the gilt over the same stale old gingerbread, and try to make inexperienced young folks believe that it is solid gold, just as our predecessors endeavoured to persuade us?

Suddenly Oswin Grace seemed to recall himself to the matter-of-fact question under discussion.

"That," he said, "is the worst of making friends. One is bound to drift away from

them. But still it is foolish to hold aloof on that account."

She laughed in rather a strained way.

"Our maritime philosopher," she said, "will now expound a maxim. Ex-pound. Derivation—to pound out."

"Shall I get the tickets?" he asked in a practical way.

"Please."

"Well, then, I will go off at once and book them."

He shook hands and left her standing in the middle of the room.

"Perhaps," she murmured regretfully, "it was very cruel—or it may be only my own self-conceit. At all events it was not so cruel as they are to Helen. I do not think that they will *both* go now."





CHAPTER XI.

GREEK AND GREEK.

SCARCELY had the front door closed behind Oswin Grace when the bell was rung again.

Miss Winter standing in the drawing-room heard the tones of a man's voice, and in a few moments the maid knocked and came into the drawing-room.

"A gentleman, please, Miss: a Mr. Easton," she said, doubtfully.

"Mr. Easton," repeated Agnes Winter, catching the inflection of doubt. For a moment she forgot who this might be.

“He gave his full name, Miss,” added the servant with faltering gravity.

“Oh.”

“Mr. Matthew Mark Easton.”

“Of course—show him up at once.”

Matthew Mark Easton had evidently devoted some care to the question of dress on this occasion. Some extra care perhaps, for he was a peculiarly neat man. He always wore a narrow silk tie in the form of a bow of which the ends were allowed to stick straight out sideways, over the waistcoat. His coat was embellished by an orchid.

“I am afraid,” he began at once, with perfect equanimity, “that I have made a mistake—a social blunder.”

“How so?” inquired Miss Winter, smiling her ready smile.

“I do not think that your hired girl expected visitors at this time in the

morning," he replied, waiting obviously for her to take a seat.

"I am afraid Ann is rather eccentric," began the lady, apologetically, but he stopped her with a laugh.

"Oh no!" he said, "she did not think that I had come about the gas-meter, or anything like that. But her face is expressive if homely; plain, I mean."

"I hope that it only expressed polite surprise."

"That was all," he replied, laying on the table a few beautiful flowers which he had been carrying loose in his hand. There were orchids and white lilac and pale heliotrope. "I brought you these," he explained, "but I did not come on purpose to bring them. I came on business, so to speak. I have noticed that when Englishmen are by way of being sociable, when they are going to a dance or a theatre or

to make calls, they always carry a flower in their button-hole, so I bought one. I thought it would explain to your domestic servant that I had come to call, but she perhaps failed to see my flower. When I was buying it, I saw these other ones and—and thought they would look nice in your parlour.”

He looked round him in his formal American way, and interrupted her thanks by saying that it was a very pretty room.

She rose, and taking up the delicate flowers proceeded at once to place them in water.

“I came,” he then explained, “to inform you that I have secured a box, the stage-box, for Wednesday night, at the Epic Theatre. It will be doing me a pleasure if you will form one of my party.”

Still engaged with the flowers, Miss

Winter began thanking him vaguely without actually accepting.

"I do not know," he said, "exactly how these things are managed in England, but I want Miss Grace and her brother to come as my guests too. Miss Grace was kind enough to ask me to be one of a theatre party, and mentioned the Epic, so I went right away and got a box."

"Oswin has just gone to procure seats for the same night," said Miss Winter, quickly.

"No," replied the American; "I stopped him. I met him in the street."

Miss Winter knew that they must have met actually on her doorstep, and she wondered why he should have deliberately made a misstatement. She felt indefinitely guilty, as if Oswin's visit had been surreptitious. Suddenly she became aware of the quick flitting glance of her companion's eyes,

noting everything—each tiny flicker of the eyelids, each indrawn breath, each slightest movement.

“How am I to do it?” he asked, innocently. “A note to Miss Grace, or a verbal invitation to her brother?”

“A note,” replied Miss Winter, with a gravity equal to his own, “to Helen, saying that you have secured the stage-box for Wednesday evening, and hope that she and her brother will accept seats in it.”

He nodded his head, signifying comprehension, and rose to go.

“Thank you,” he said; “in America we would not be so circumlocutory. We would say, ‘Dear Miss Grace, will you come to the theatre with self and friends on Wednesday?’ But I am anxious to do what is right over here. I respect your British institutions and your domestic servants; the two hold together right through. Half

the institutions are adhered to on account of the servants. Half your British gentlemen dress for dinner because their butler puts on a claw-hammer coat for the same. Half your ladies wash their hands for lunch because the hired girl has taken up a tin of hot water."

"And in America," said Miss Winter, who had not risen from her seat, "you have no respect for your servants?"

"Not much—we pretend we have. We pretend that we are all equal, and of course we are not. We think that we are very simple, and we are in reality very complex. Our social life is so complicated as to be almost impossible. No; you are the simplest people on earth, because you like doing exactly what your immediate ancestors did. We are not content with a generation, we must go farther back for our model, or else we have no model at all, but try to be one."

“I think,” said Miss Winter, “that you are more conscious of yourselves than we are. I do not mean self-conscious ; it is not so strong as that. You are self-analytical.”

“Yes,” answered Easton, still lingering, although he did not take a seat in obedience to her evident wish. “We feel our own feelings ; we think about our own thoughts ; *nous nous écoutons* mentally.”

“As a nation ?” she inquired, with some interest.

“Yes, as a nation. We think, and talk, and write about our national morals, about the evolution of the national mind. You have nothing in common but your political wrangles.”

“England,” said Miss Winter, without disparagement, indeed with a sort of pride, “is the only country that does not talk of Progress, and write it with a capital P.”

Matthew Mark Easton came back again towards the fire-place ; like all Americans, he loved comparisons.

“Progress,” he said, “spelt as you suggest is a disease. It fixed itself upon England in the days of your virgin queen ; you have lived it down, and are all the stronger now for having been affected. We got it next, and I surmise that we had it badly. France is suffering now, and she has had a still sharper attack, so sharp that surgery came into play—the knife—the knife they called the guillotine. Russia is the next upon the list ; she will have it worst of all, her surgery will be effected with a dirty axe.”

“Your mention of Russia,” said Miss Winter, skipping away from the subject under discussion with all the inconsequence of her sex and kind, “reminds me of something I heard said of you the other evening. It was, in fact, said to me.”

“Then,” replied the American, with cheery gallantry, “I should like to hear it. Had it been said to any one else I allow that I should have been indifferent.”

He stood with his hands clasped behind his back, looking down at her with a smile upon his wistful little face.

“Do you know Mr. Santow?”

The smile vanished, and the dancing eyes at once assumed an expression of alert keenness, which was almost ludicrous in its contrast.

“The Russian *attaché*—unaccredited?” he replied, giving back question for question.

Miss Winter nodded her head.

“No—” he said, slowly; “I do not; I think I know him by sight.”

“I have met him on several occasions. I rather like him, although I cannot understand him. There is an inward Mr. Santow whom I have not met yet; I only

know a creature who smiles and behaves generally like a lamb."

"Santow," said Easton, deliberately, "is altogether too guileless."

Miss Winter countered sharply.

"I thought you did not know him?"

"I do not," answered Easton, imperturbably.

"Except by reputation?"

"Precisely."

"He is reputed," said Miss Winter, "to be a great diplomatist."

"So I believe — hence the lamb-like manners."

Easton's face was a study in the art of suppressing curiosity.

"Do you think that he is a wolf in lamb's clothing?" asked the lady with a laugh.

"No; I think he is an ass, if you will excuse a slight mixture of metaphor."

Miss Winter laughed again in a light-hearted, irresponsible way.

“I will tell you,” she said, “what he said about you.”

“Thank you.”

“We were talking about Russia—it is his favourite topic—and he said that at times he felt like the envoy from some heathen country, so little is Russia known by us. By way of illustration he asked me to look round the room and tell him if it did not contain all that was most intellectual and learned in England. I admitted that he was right. He said, ‘And yet there are but two men in the room who speak Russian. Then he pointed you out. ‘That is one,’ he said; ‘he knows my country better than any man in England. If he were a diplomatist I should fear him!’ ‘What is he?’ I asked, and he merely shrugged his shoulders in that guileless way to which you object.”

Matthew Mark Easton did not appear to be much impressed. He moved from one foot to the other and took considerable interest in the pattern of the carpet.

“And,” he inquired, “did he mention the name of the second accomplished person?”

“No.”

“I wonder who it was?” said Easton.

“Mr. Tyars,” suggested the lady, calmly.

“Possibly. By the way, I thought of asking him to join us on Wednesday at the Epic.”

“I hope,” said Miss Winter, with a gracious little bow, “that he will be able to come.”

“‘Dear Miss Grace,’” began Easton, solemnly, as if repeating a lesson. “‘I have secured the stage-box at the Epic for Wednesday evening next, and hope that you and your brother will do me the pleasure of accepting seats in it.’ Will that do?”

“ Very nicely.”

“ And I may count on you ? ”

“ Yes ; you may count on me.”

“ Thank you,” he said, simply, and took his departure.

As he walked rapidly eastward towards the club where he was expecting to meet Tyars, his quaint little face was wrinkled up into a thousand interrogations.

“ Yes,” he said, at length, with a knowing nod, “ it was a warning ; that spry little lady smells a rat. How does she know that Tyars speaks Russian ? He is not the sort of fellow to boast of his accomplishments. She must have heard it from Grace, and to hear from him she must have asked, because Grace is more than half inclined to be jealous of Tyars, and would take care not to remove the bushel from his light.”

For some time he walked on whistling a tune softly. Cheerfulness is only a habit.

He did not really feel cheerful, nor particularly inclined for music. Then he began reflecting in an undertone again.

“Here I am,” he said, “in a terrible fright of two women; all my schemes may be upset by either of them, and I do not know which to fear most—that clever little lady with her sharp wits, or that girl’s eyes. I almost think Miss Helen’s eyes are the more dangerous; I am sure they would be if it was my affair—if it was me whom those quiet eyes followed about. But it is not; it is Tyars. Now I wonder—I wonder if he knows it?”





CHAPTER XII.

EASTON'S BOX.

IT occasionally happens to the most astute of us to act, and even take some trouble over our action without quite knowing why we do so. There is a little motive called human impulse which at times upsets the deepest calculations. Not one of us has met a man or woman whose every action and every word was the result of forethought, and consequently fraught with a deeper meaning and a fuller design than would appear upon the surface. Such persons do exist, of course—because the

lady novelist tells us so. There can be no doubt of it. I merely venture to observe that in our small way we have not met them yet in the flesh.

Had the keen-witted Easton been asked why he felt impelled to disburse ten guineas for the benefit of the lessee of the Epic Theatre he would scarcely have been able to make an immediate reply. In his rapid airy fashion he had picked up and pieced together certain little bits of evidence tending to prove that the young people with whom he found himself on somewhat sudden terms of intimacy were exceedingly partial to each other's society. As may have been gathered from his own outspoken reflections, he had drawn certain conclusions respecting Helen Grace. He had never known women intimately, and to him as to many in the same position the feelings of a woman were something almost sacred. I

must even ask you to believe that he held the quaint old-fashioned opinion that it is man's duty to spare women as much as possible—to make their way here among the rocks as smooth as they can—to be gallant and gentle—to be brave for them and to fear for them—to look upon them as a frail and delicate and beautiful treasure placed into their hands to cherish and to love; to be proud of. Ha! ha! How funny it sounds! How ludicrous! Try and realize that men like you and me once held these views in good earnest—that there are even a few holding them now. But of course the rest of us know better. We know that in treasuring and cherishing we insult a being whose soul is higher than ours, whose intellect would be loftier than ours had it freedom to soar, whose mere physical inferiority in the matter of brute force is a question of training and of

athletic exercise. Is it possible to be gallant and gentle to a being however lovely who can get up on the first platform and pour forth a stream of eloquence, of reason, and of argument, or to one who can sit down and write a slashing article for an advanced magazine dealing with the realistic side of human life boldly, and without fear? *Merci!* Not for me. Let us admit our inferiority at once. Our slow tongues cleave to the roof of our mouth at the thought of debate—our halting pens splutter at the brink of realism.

In this respect, then, it must be admitted that Matthew Mark Easton was behind the times. He was one of the millions of men who never read those slashing articles, and never attend the animated debates; one of the millions who stay at home, and read the comic papers—who are content with facts and ignore fancies. He had only once met

a modern woman. It was on the occasion of an intellectual gathering whither he had repaired in the hopes of meeting a great Russian novelist. As soon as he entered the room his quick eyes detected her—a very plain woman, large and clumsy, short-sighted, and shockingly dressed. Her chief outward signs of greatness were an aggressive eagerness of manner and a deep-seated sense of self-satisfaction.

“What,” inquired Easton very gravely of a friend, “in the name of goodness is that thing?”

On receiving a detailed reply, he added, with the same imperturbable solemnity—

“Then take it away—send it off in a hired carriage—I don’t like it.”

And from that day forth he treated the whole question of woman’s rights with the same reprehensible levity. For him the leaven failed to affect the whole, and he

continued to hold his strange old-world views of womankind.

He had no desire to pry into the secrets of Helen's heart. Such curiosity would have been unmanly and cowardly. But he simply looked upon Claud Tyars as a man who was different from the others for Helen Grace. We know what it means, some of us—that difference; for most of us have known a man or woman who was different from the others.

Under the circumstances his simple creed was avoidance. He was no Stoic, this little American. He held no mistaken opinions as to the powers of endurance vouchsafed to the human heart. Being physically delicate, his perception was keener and his knowledge of women subtler than that of a strong man like Claud Tyars. He was however eminently practical. Claud Tyars and Helen Grace were clearly called

upon by the force of circumstances to avoid each other. If they declined to take the initiative, force must be used. Under the same circumstances Matthew Mark Easton would have acted up to his own creed with a steady sense of purpose amounting to more than stoicism.

And yet he deliberately took a box at the theatre and invited the two young people to join his party. On reflection he realized suddenly that the two other members of the party were in an almost similar position. In his anxiety respecting Tyars he had quite overlooked the danger to which he was exposing Oswin Grace. He himself was the fifth man—an alternative third, likely to be ill received by either couple. He tried to persuade himself that the theatre scheme would have been unconditionally carried through despite any efforts of his, and that as his guests he

would be able to manage these people much better than he could have done as a guest of theirs. But he was distinctly sensible of the fact that there was in reality no question of management, and that in practice his influence over any of the persons implicated was remarkably small.

On the evening fixed Easton took care to be early on the scene of action. It had been his intention to invite Tyars to dine with him, but on reflection he abandoned this hospitable scheme. A general rendezvous at the theatre was more formal, and would put the whole affair in the light of a bachelor's return for hospitality received, rather than the gathering together of close friends. This distinction was subtle ; but without such powers of distinguishing no man gets very far on in the world. The human career is one long effort at distinction, one long choice between that which

is good and that which is evil, between things profitable and unprofitable.

Matthew Mark Easton was leisurely surveying the half-empty house when Miss Winter, Helen Grace, and Oswin were shown into the box by an official. His quick glance detected a momentary droop of Helen's eyelids. A blundering man would have made some reference to Tyars' lateness of arrival. Easton did no such thing. He proceeded to draw forward chairs for the ladies, and did the honours with a certain calm ease which in no way savoured of familiarity.

"I should like," said Miss Winter, untying the ribbon of a jaunty little opera-cloak, "the darkest corner."

"Why?" asked Helen, almost sharply.

"Because the piece is said to be very touching, and I invariably weep."

"Sorry," said Easton; "sorry it cannot

be done. But I can lend you a huge pair of opera-glasses."

"But," urged Miss Winter, "my tears *drop*—audibly on the programme."

"We want the dark corners for the men—the background," urged the American, holding a chair invitingly. "We love the shadow—eh, Grace?"

"Speak for yourself," said that sailor bluntly, pulling forward a second chair and seating himself immediately behind Miss Winter.

Things were not going well. There was a vacant chair close to that occupied by Helen Grace. Easton looked at it for a moment and then deliberately brought another forward from the back of the box. At this moment the orchestra ceased, and the curtain ran smoothly up. All turned their eyes towards the stage, but the two ladies glanced occasionally over their

shoulders as if in expectation of a new arrival. Matthew Mark Easton saw these glances, but his imperturbable little smile concealed whatever thoughts may have been passing through his mind. The manager of the Epic Theatre never allowed a farce upon his stage. The first play this evening was a little story of Coppée's skilfully translated. Like most of that Frenchman's productions, the interest of this play gathered and culminated. Half unwillingly the four occupants of the stage-box allowed themselves to become interested. When at last the curtain dropped Claud Tyars was standing behind them ; he had entered the box unheard and unnoticed.

During the greetings that followed, more than one person observed that he looked somewhat stronger, somewhat larger than ever, but that in his face there was a difference. It lay, perhaps, in the fact that

a greater portion of sunburn had been bleached out of his skin by the gloom of an English winter. Oswin Grace was, curiously enough, reminded at that moment of a very different scene. For a second there arose in his mind a vivid recollection of the moss-grown deck of the *Martial*, and of this same face, these same deep eyes looking at him from beneath the tattered brim of an old Panama hat. The two scenes were as unlike as could well be ; but in the glare of the pitiless electric light there was a momentary flash of stubborn energy which the young sailor had only seen in one pair of eyes before, under the scorching rays of a tropical sun. It may, of course, have been nothing else than a very natural contraction of the eyelids under a glare of light, but it imparted to the man's face a restless, hunted expression quite out of keeping with his placid manner.

Oswin resumed his seat beside Miss Winter as unostentatiously as possible. Easton and Tyars were thus left standing side by side. Helen, who was half turned towards them, glanced up thoughtfully from time to time. The contrast they afforded might well have struck a less observant onlooker. The girl raised her lace fan so that she might watch them unobtrusively. In outward appearance the two men could scarcely have been less similar. One tall, rather fair, and singularly quiet; the other small, nervous, quick, and dark. The one was eminently and undoubtedly an athlete, the outturn of English public school and university; the other frail and intellectual. He might possess deftness, nimbleness, skill, but in the nervous limbs there could be no great strength. They almost looked like beings of a different creation, and yet they were

what we vaguely call "chums." Tyars was won't to speak of his "friend Easton" in a careless Britannic way, while the American talked of "Old Tyars" with undisguised affection.

Chance observers in the other parts of the theatre glanced at the stage-box, noted the presence of two beautiful women, and some perhaps looked beyond the two gracious heads. If such there were, they probably passed on with a mere mental comment respecting the big, fine-looking fellow and the insignificant little man at his side. No one would have associated them in a joint labour, no one would have put them down as Quixotic law-breakers. It is so easy, you see, to conspire, so simple to break the law if you have only a decent coat upon your back.

But the girl who was watching them close at hand had no suspicion of aught

concealed from her. She only knew that they were singular men, that they were the only two who had yet crossed the pathway of her young life without raising their eyes from the road they trod. With the intuition of her sex she had unconsciously found the one characteristic possessed by both. Without analysis, without study it had come to her. She was simply aware of it—the knowledge had crept into her soul stealthily. She knew that they were equally possessed of an abnormal strength of purpose. Then she found herself wondering what the mental attitude of each might be towards the other. She had seen them together frequently, it is true, but they were not effusive. They almost ignored each other. There was something in their attitudes, as they stood side by side without speaking, which told Helen in plainer language that they were friends than any

social intercourse had hitherto demonstrated. She wondered vaguely in which mind was hidden the initiative, in which the executive, and by natural transition she glided on to mental question as to how each and both would act in a crisis, in a moment of physical or moral danger. For maidens, I take it, are little altered since those brave days when gentlemen were knights. I believe that they still would wish us to be upright and fearless before the world. It boots not that we be very clever or very intellectual, great musicians, artists, writers; but they would have us gentle towards themselves, very cool, and quite ready in moments of danger. They would have us readier with our hands than with our tongues, strong and simple—manly.

It was rather strange that Helen Grace should have had these thoughts just then. Later on, when she could remember anything

at all, she recollected them and wondered if it was really a mere coincidence.

For some time the two men stood, each declining to make the first move. There were two chairs, but one had a distinct advantage over the other. At last Easton pointed to the seat close to Helen.

“Will you sit there, Tyars?” he said, hospitably.

One great fault in Matthew Mark Easton was soft-heartedness. He was one of those mistaken men who hesitate to punish a dog.

“Thank you,” said the Englishman, appropriating the chair nonchalantly.

“It appears,” continued Easton, who was beginning to fear that Tyars was in a silent mood, “that the piece is touching. We shall require your moral support; that calm exterior of yours will, I surmise, assist us materially to keep a serene countenance turned towards the stalls.”

“Don’t be personal,” replied the Englishman. “You may rely upon me at the pathetic parts. It is some years since I wept.”

“The last time I did it,” said the American, thoughtfully, “was when I got my ears boxed because another fellow broke a window.”

Helen and Miss Winter laughed. They all felt that there was a hitch somewhere. They were conversationally lame and halt.

“We both told untruths about it,” continued Easton, determined to work this mine to its deepest. “But mine failed while his succeeded. That was why I wept. Mine was not an artistic lie, I admit; but it might have got through with a little good luck. There is nothing so humiliating as an unsuccessful attempt to pervert the truth. Have you not found that so, Miss Winter? But of course you would not

know. I apologize ; I am sorry. Of course you never tell them."

"Oh yes," said the lady candidly, "I do."

At this moment the curtain was drawn up, and Miss Winter broke off suddenly in the midst of her confession, turning towards the stage and settling herself comfortably to watch the play. In so doing she unconsciously drew her chair a little farther away from Helen, and thus left her and Claud Tyars more distinctly apart.

This was scarcely noticeable during the act, which was of a thrilling and absorbing nature ; but when the curtain fell again it was suddenly obvious to them both that they could now talk in slightly lowered tones without being overheard.





CHAPTER XIII.

AN EMERGENCY.

THE effect of the discovery that they distinctly formed a group apart was barely visible to the keenest glance. Helen's slow gentle eyes were turned towards the centre of the house, bent vaguely on the brightly-dressed occupants of the stalls.

Tyars took up a programme and began studying it.

"Who is the man," he said, "playing the villain? I am frightfully ignorant in theatrical matters."

"He is good, is he not?" said the girl, mentioning the actor's name.

“Yes. He is unconscious of being a villain, which touch of nature makes him very human.”

Helen seemed to be rather struck with these words spoken indifferently with down-turned eyes.

“Are villains in real life unconscious of their villainy?” she asked at length, with perfunctory interest.

“I do not know,” he answered, with a pre-occupation which saved his manner from being actually rude; “I should think so—yes—certainly.”

He raised his head, and the effort with which he avoided looking towards her was probably detected by the gentle gray eyes.

There was a little silence: hardly irksome because the invisible orchestra was now in full blast.

“I suppose,” said Helen, closing her fan, “that all this is rather trivial for you. The

interest you take in it must be superficial now that you are so busy."

"Oh no!" Tyars hastened to begin; he was looking past her in that strangely persistent way into the theatre, and something he saw there made him turn his head quickly towards the stage.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed. Then he caught her wrist in his grasp. "Keep still," he whispered.

The painted curtain was bellying right forward like the mainsail of a barque, and from the space at either side a sudden volume of smoke poured forth in huge uneven clouds.

In a second the whole audience was on its feet, and for a moment a sickening silence reigned—the breathless silence of supreme fear.

Then a single form appeared on the stage. It was that of the man referred to by Claud

Tyars a moment before; he who played the villain's part so unconsciously. He was still in his dark wig and pallid make-up. On his arm he carried the coat he had just taken off, and the other arm clad in white shirt-sleeve was raised in a gesture of command.

"I must ask you," he cried, in a full clear voice, "to leave your seats as . . ."

And his tones were drowned, completely overwhelmed by a strange unearthly roar; the roar of a thousand human voices raised in one surging wail of despair, like the din of surf upon a shingle shore.

The man shouted, and his gestures were almost ludicrous even at that supreme moment, for no sound could be heard from his lips.

Then the gas was turned out, and in the darkness a terrible struggle began. Some who came out of it could liken it to nothing

on earth, but they said that they had gained a clearer comprehension of what hell might be. Women shrieked and men forgot themselves—blaspheming aloud.

As the gas flickered and finally collapsed, those in the stage-box caught a momentary vision of wild distorted faces coming towards them. The pit had overflowed the stalls. Strong barriers crumbled like matchwood. Into a hundred minds at once there had flashed the hope of escape through the stage-boxes.

“Grace! Easton!” It was Tyars’ voice raised, and yet not shouting. The crisis had come, the danger was at hand, and Helen knew who it was that would take the lead.

She heard the two men answer.

“Keep the people back. I will break open the door on to the stage; it is our best chance.”

The girl felt herself lifted from the ground and carried to the back of the box.

“Helen!” whispered Tyars.

“Yes!”

“Are you all right?”

“Yes.”

“I thought you had fainted, you were so quiet! Hold on to my coat! Never leave go of that!”

He turned away from her, and above the din and uproar came the sound of his blows upon the woodwork of the door. It seemed impossible that such strokes could have been dealt by an unarmed human hand.

Between the blows came the sickening sound of the struggle at the front of the box. Imprecations, blasphemy, and supplications, mingled with groans and the dull thud of merciless fists upon human faces. Shoulder to shoulder the two men—the American and the Englishman—fought for

the lives of the women placed by the hand of God under their protection. It was a terrible task, though few women reached the front of the box. Each man struck down, each assailant beaten back was doomed, and the defenders knew it. Once down, once underfoot, and it was a matter of moments.

Fresh assailants came crowding on, treading on the fallen and consequently obtaining an ever-increasing advantage as they rose on a level with the defenders. Neither seemed to question the wisdom of 'Tyars' command. It was a matter of life or death. Those already in the stage-box would only be crushed by the onrush of the others were they allowed to enter. With a dazed desperation the two men faced the frightful odds, hammering wildly with both fists. Their arms ached from sheer hard work, and they panted hoarsely. Their eyeballs

throbbed with the effort to pierce unfathomable darkness. It was quite certain that their defence could not last long.

“Stick to it!” yelled Tyars. He might have been on the deck of the *Martial* during a white squall, so great was the uproar all round him.

At last there was the sound of breaking wood.

“Grace!” shouted the voice of Tyars.

“Yes.”

“Look after Miss Winter when we go.”

“Right.”

“Easton!” he cried again.

“Yes, old man!”

“Come last, and keep them back if you can.”

Then a minute later he shouted, “Come!”

At the same instant the roaring crowd of madmen poured in over the low front of the box, like soldiers storming a bastion.

The door which Tyars had succeeded in opening was so narrow as to admit of the passage of only one person at a time, but at this instant the larger door leading into a narrow passage, the real exit from the stage-box, broke down before a pressure from without, and from this point also a stream of half-demented beings tried to force an entrance.

The only advantage possessed by the original occupants of the box was that they knew the position of the small door.

The subsequent recollections of such individuals as survived were so fragmentary and vague that no connected story of the terrible tragedy in the stage-box of the Epic Theatre was ever given to the public.

Miss Winter remembered finding herself caught up in a strong pair of arms, which she presumed to be those of Oswin Grace. Almost at the same moment she and her

protector were thrown to the ground. After that the next thing she could remember was the touch of a hand over her face and hair, and a whispered voice in her ear—

“Agnes Winter—is this you?”

She recognized the peculiar American twang which was never unpleasant. At that moment she almost laughed.

“Yes—yes,” she answered.

“Then crawl to your left. Don’t try to get up—crawl over this man. I don’t know who he is, but I surmise he is dead.”

She obeyed, and found her way out of the narrow door and up some steps. Close behind her followed some one, whom she took to be Matthew Mark Easton, but it ultimately turned out to be Oswin Grace, who was in his turn followed by the American, but not until later.

Helen Grace heard the word “come,” and submitted obediently to the supporting arm

which half dragged, half carried her up some steps. She remembered being carried like a child, through some darksome place where the atmosphere was cold and damp. Then she was conscious of a halt, followed closely by the sound of breaking wood and the tearing of some material—probably canvas, for they were among the scenery. After that she probably fainted, and was only brought to consciousness by the shock of a violent fall in which her companion was undermost. Then she heard a voice calling out—

“This way, sir ; this way.”

She recollected seeing a fireman standing in a narrow passage waving a lantern. By the time that she reached the open air she was quite conscious.

“Let me walk,” she said, “I am all right. Where is Agnes?”

“They are behind,” answered Tyars.

“She is all right. She has two men to look after her. You have only me.”

“Wait for them,” said the girl. “I will not go home without them.”

“All right; we shall wait outside. Let us get out first.”

They were standing in a small room, probably the office of the theatre, and a policeman stationed near the window, of which the framework had been broken away, called to them impatiently.

The window was about four feet from the ground, and Helen wondered momentarily why Claud Tyars accomplished the drop so clumsily. In the narrow street he turned to a police inspector, and pointed to the window.

“Lift the lady down,” he said.

A cab was near at hand, and in it they waited—seated side by side in silence—for what seemed hours. The crowd dropped

away, seeking some more interesting spot. At last there was a movement at the window, and Tyars got out of the cab and went away, leaving Helen in an agony of mute suspense. In a few moments it was over and the girl breathed freely.

It seemed strangely unreal and dream-like to hear Agnes Winter's voice again ; to see her standing on the pavement beneath the yellow gas-lamp, drawing together the gay little opera-cloak round her shoulders.

As Miss Winter stepped into the cab she leant forward and kissed Helen. That was all ; no word was said. But the two women sat hand-in-hand during the drive home.

Tyars and Oswin spoke together a few words in a lowered tone quite overwhelmed by the rattle of the cab, and then sat silently. The light of occasional lamps flashed in through the unwashed window, and showed that the men's clothes were

covered with dirt and dust, which neither attempted to brush off.

When the cab stopped in Brook Street, Oswin got out first, and going up the steps opened the front door noiselessly with a latch-key. Tyars paid the cabman, and followed the ladies into the house.

The gas in the hall and dining-room had been lowered, and they all stood for a moment in the gloom round the daintily-dressed table. When Oswin Grace turned up the gas they looked at each other curiously.

The two men bore greater evidence to the terrible ordeal through which they had passed than the ladies. Oswin's coat-sleeve was nearly torn off, while his waistcoat hung open, all the buttons having been wrenched away. Upon his shirt-front there were deep red drops of blood slowly congealing, and the marks of dirty fingers right

across the rumpled linen. His face was deeply scratched, and the blood had trickled down into his trim dark beard, unheeded, unquenched.

As to clothing, Claud Tyars was very much in the same condition, but there was a peculiarity worth noting in the expression of his face as he looked round with a half-suppressed smile. All the lines of care were smoothed away from it. In his eyes there dwelt a clear glow of excitement (the deep inward excitement of a man accustomed to the exercise of an iron control over his own feelings), which had taken the place of a certain concentrated frown of pre-occupation, as if something were going wrong.

There was something characteristic of their calling in the manner in which both men ignored completely the dilapidated condition of their apparel. That alone

would have told a keen observer that they were sailors—men accustomed to foul weather and heavy damage—accustomed to accepting things as they come with a placid hope of fairer weather ahead when repairs might be effected.

Miss Winter kept her opera-cloak closed, simply stating that her dress was torn. Her hair was becomingly untidy, but she showed no sign of scratch or hurt.

Helen was hardly ruffled, beyond a few little stray curls, almost golden in colour, stealing down beside her ears. Her dress, however, was a little torn at one shoulder, and a tiny scratch was visible upon the white arm exposed to view. She doubtless owed her immunity from harm, and in all human probability the safety of her life, to the enormous bodily strength of Claud Tyars.

It was she who spoke first.

“Your arm!” she said, pointing to Tyars’ right sleeve. “Have you hurt it?”

He looked down at the limb, which was hanging in a peculiar way very close to his body, with a vague and questioning smile, as if it were not his property.

“Yes,” he said, “it is broken.”

Miss Winter and Oswin went to his side at once. Helen alone remained standing at the table. She said no word, but continued looking at him with very bright eyes, her lips slightly parted, breathing deeply.

He avoided meeting her glance in the same awkward, embarrassed way which she had noticed before; answering the questions put to him with a reassuring smile.

“It happened,” he said, “during the first rush. We fell down somewhere through some scenery, and my arm came underneath.”

“You put it underneath,” corrected Helen, almost coldly, “to . . . save me, I suppose.”

Her first feeling was unaccountably akin to anger.

“Instinct,” he explained, tersely.

“Shall I fetch a doctor, or will you come with me?” asked the practical Oswin, gently forcing his friend into a chair. “We are surrounded by them in Brook Street.”

“I will go with you,” answered Tyars. “But first, I think, we had better see that the ladies have some wine.”

With his left hand he reached a decanter, but Miss Winter took it from him.

“You must have some,” she said, pouring it out.”

“No, thanks,” he replied; “I think not, on account of inflammation.”

“He is better without it,” added Oswin.

Miss Winter gave a little short laugh, very suggestive of annoyance.

“You men are so terribly practical. I should like to sympathize with Mr. Tyars, to minister to him, and take up a picturesque attitude, but you give me no chance,” she said, with a bantering air which was half serious.

“An arm broken below the elbow is not so very serious,” explained Tyars.

“Claud,” added Oswin Grace, “is one of those great strong healthy people who heal like horses.”

Nevertheless he kept close to his large friend, and glanced at times into the colourless face with those keen experienced gray eyes of his.

It was, as Tyars had said, nothing very serious—a simple fracture below the elbow and well above the wrist—but the consequences of it might be serious. Claud

Tyars was not thinking of the numb, aching pain which had now spread right up his arm. It was only natural that the first thought should be for the great absorbing scheme which was filling his mind. In little more than two months he was to sail from London. In nine weeks he was to lead a picked body of men forth on an expedition of which the peril was patent to them all. He could not afford to devote his few remaining days of preparation to his own health, to the mere recovery from the effects of an accident. There were a thousand details still to be cared for—details which none other but himself could grasp or cope with. For it is the man who reduces detail to a minimum in his own daily existence, and sees personally to that minimum, who finds time to do great things in life. If we hand details over to others—if we wish to be waited on hand and foot in

order to find leisure for the larger items of the conglomerate detail called a career, we shall probably employ all our time in endeavouring to teach others to divine our wants.

There are men in the world who pack their own bags, and others who make the task over to some one else. Claud Tyars was of the former; he habitually did his own packing.





CHAPTER XIV.

A MIDNIGHT CALL.

REFUSING all offers of hospitality made by Oswin and his sister, Claud Tyars went off with his friend to the doctor's, leaving the ladies comfortably installed in arm-chairs by the fire.

They protested that they could not possibly sleep, and that, as it was only twelve o'clock, they would await Oswin's return.

You will say, perhaps, that they were all a trifle too self-possessed and calm to be quite natural. Critical readers will be inclined to give judgment against the poor narrator

of these events, accusing him of mismanagement. But there is a certain merit in truthfulness. If any of these ladies had fainted, and clung wildly to their rescuers with bewildering abandonment, it should have been recorded. If Helen Grace had whispered neatly-turned phrases expressive of gratitude to the hungry ears of Claud Tyars, those words should have been set down here. But none of these things happened. What really took place is narrated above; and it is not the fault of the writer if these persons chose to lose a series of dramatic points, to ignore a number of thrilling situations, and to refrain from anything approaching heroics.

The truth of the matter is, that ladies and gentlemen of this latter end of the nineteenth century are difficult subjects to write about. They will not, like folks upon the stage, make facial contortions capable of

record as showing inward emotions. They will not laugh fiendish laughs, nor sigh "heigho!" nor tear their hair, nor beat their bosoms as people did fifty years ago, if one may judge from fictional literature. They are so persistently self-possessed that one cannot wring a dramatic situation out of them anyhow.

We live so quickly nowadays, pass through so many emotions in the day, that our feelings are apt to lose their individuality. When a man can attend a christening in Westminster Abbey, a wedding in Bristol Cathedral, a funeral at Exeter, and finally partake of a regimental dinner at Plymouth, in the same day, one must hardly blame him for failing to be deeply moved by any one of the ceremonies mentioned.

Claud Tyars actually said "Good-night," as he preceded Oswin Grace out of the room. Such an exit was utterly false to

dramatic art, utterly clumsy and ignorant. Now what can one do with such a man as this? He did not even limp in order to show that his arm was injured, as has been done upon the English stage, but walked out of the room without looking back.

And the two ladies left there sat, each in her deep arm-chair, toasting her neatly-shod toes on the fender, and said never a word. They both stared into the fire with such a marked persistence, that one might almost have suspected them of fearing to meet each other's glance.

At last Helen moved. She had evidently just become aware of a black mark on the soft mauve material of her dress. With her gloved hand she attempted to brush it off, and as this had no effect began rubbing it with a tiny handkerchief. Then she raised her eyes. Miss Winter was watching

her with a curious smile—a smile much more suggestive of pain than of pleasure.

Their eyes met, and for some moments both seemed on the verge of saying something, which was never said. Then suddenly Helen leant forward and covered her face with her two hands.

Have you ever seen a woman weep from whose eyes tears have never flowed since childhood? Have you ever seen eyes kindling with a strange surprise through tears, as if they could not understand what was blinding and burning them? It is often hard to realize sorrow, and it is always hard to accept it as one's own property. With some the power of assimilating sorrow is merely a matter of tears, with others it is a dryer process. The habit of shedding tears brings a familiarity which deprives them of their bitterness. Most people, however, and especially in this generation,

weep but once or twice in their whole lives. The majority, thank God! only once. Again, the most of us do it in solitude, so that others are spared the sight. It seemed to come to Helen Grace without premonition as a harsh surprise—just as death will come to some of us. She had no time to fly to her own room—no chance of exercising over herself that command which she had learnt from living with men alone.

It is just possible that Miss Winter was not without experience in these same tears. One can never be quite sure of these very cheery women whom one meets everywhere. She made no attempts at consolation. She did not look towards her friend, and there was no outward sign even of sympathy, except that her eyes glistened in a peculiar way. She merely waited, and, moreover, she had not long to do so. Helen recovered herself as suddenly as she had given way,

and rising from her chair, stood with her shoulder turned towards her friend, her two hands upon the mantel-piece, looking down into the fire. Her attitude, moral and physical, was reflective.

“I wonder,” she said, “if every one got out of the theatre.”

“Mr. Easton promised to come and tell us,” answered Miss Winter.

“To-night?”

“Yes.”

The girl raised her head and looked critically at her own reflection in the old-fashioned mirror above the fire-place. The trace of tears had almost vanished from her young eyes—it is only older countenances that bear the marks for long.

Before she moved again the sound of cab-wheels made itself audible in the street, and the vehicle was heard to stop at the door.

Miss Winter rose and went to let in the new-comer.

It was Matthew Mark Easton. He followed Miss Winter into the dining-room, walking lightly—an unnecessary precaution, for his step was like that of a child.

“I do not know,” he was saying, “the etiquette observed in England on these points, but I could not resist coming along to see if you had arrived safely.”

“Yes—thanks,” replied Helen, to whom the latter part of the remark was addressed.

“No one hurt, I trust?” continued he.

“Yes,” answered the girl gently; “Mr. Tyars is hurt—his arm is broken.”

Easton’s mobile lips closed together with a snap, betraying the fact that he had allowed himself the luxury of an expletive in his reprehensible American way. He turned aside, and walked backwards and forwards for a few minutes, like a man made restless

by the receipt of very bad news. He glanced at the face of each lady in turn, and concluded that Helen was more sympathetic than Miss Winter in this matter. In a moment he conceived the idea that Agnes Winter was by no means grieved that Tyars should have met with an accident.

He had never considered her a scheming woman, but his conception of her character was that she possessed very decided opinions of her own, and was quite capable of acting up to them against the strongest opposition. For some reason, then, she was decidedly opposed to the expedition about to be undertaken by Tyars and Oswin. He had always suspected opposition in that quarter, but it had hitherto been passive, as feminine opposition is often compelled to be. This deliberate refusal, however, to simulate a sympathy she did not feel was something more than passive in its tenor

“Not a compound fracture, I hope!” he said tersely, while turning these things over in his mind.

“He thinks not,” answered Helen, re-seating herself.

“Was he in pain?”

“I do not know,” replied the girl, in a toneless, mechanical way, which brought the quick, monkey-like eyes down upon her like lightning.

It was the matter of a second only. Like a serpent’s fang the man’s keen eyes flashed towards her and away again. The peculiarly nervous face instantly assumed an expression as near stolidity as could be compassed by features each and all laden with an exceptional intelligence. Then he turned away, and took up a broken fan lying on the supper-table, opening it tenderly and critically.

But Miss Winter was as quick as he.

She knew then that he had guessed. Whatever he might have suspected before, she had no doubt now that Matthew Mark Easton *knew* that Helen loved Claud Tyars.

"The worst of it," he broke out, with sudden airiness, "is that there was no fire at all. It was extinguished on the stage. The performance might have been continued."

"It only makes it more horrible," said Miss Winter; "for I suppose there—were some killed?"

"That is so," he answered. "They took forty-two corpses out of our box alone."

"I did not know," said Helen, after a painful pause, "that it was so bad as that."

Easton looked at her with his quaint little wistful smile.

"Yes," he said, with transatlantic deliberation, "it was very bad. We were fortunate. The Almighty has something else for us to do yet, I surmise."

“We ought to be very thankful,” said the girl, simply.

“Ya—as; and no doubt we are. I am.”

He gravely pulled down his waistcoat, and stood with his legs apart, looking down at his own diminutive boots.

The ladies noticed that he bore no signs of his recent experience. He had doubtless called in at his club to wash and tidy himself before appearing at Brook Street. His left hand was neatly bandaged with white linen.

“Grace,” he inquired, “is not hurt, I hope?”

“No, I think not. His hands were scratched — like yours,” answered Miss Winter.

“It comes,” explained Easton, looking tenderly at his injured knuckles, “from hitting in the dark. I came in contact with

some very hard things—possibly British skulls.”

Helen laughed—rather too eagerly; but Miss Winter was grave. Presently Oswin Grace came in, opening the front door with his latch-key. He was greeted by an interrogatory “Well?” from Miss Winter.

“He is all right,” he answered. “It was a simple fracture. Old Barker set it very nicely, and I sent him off to his club in a cab.”

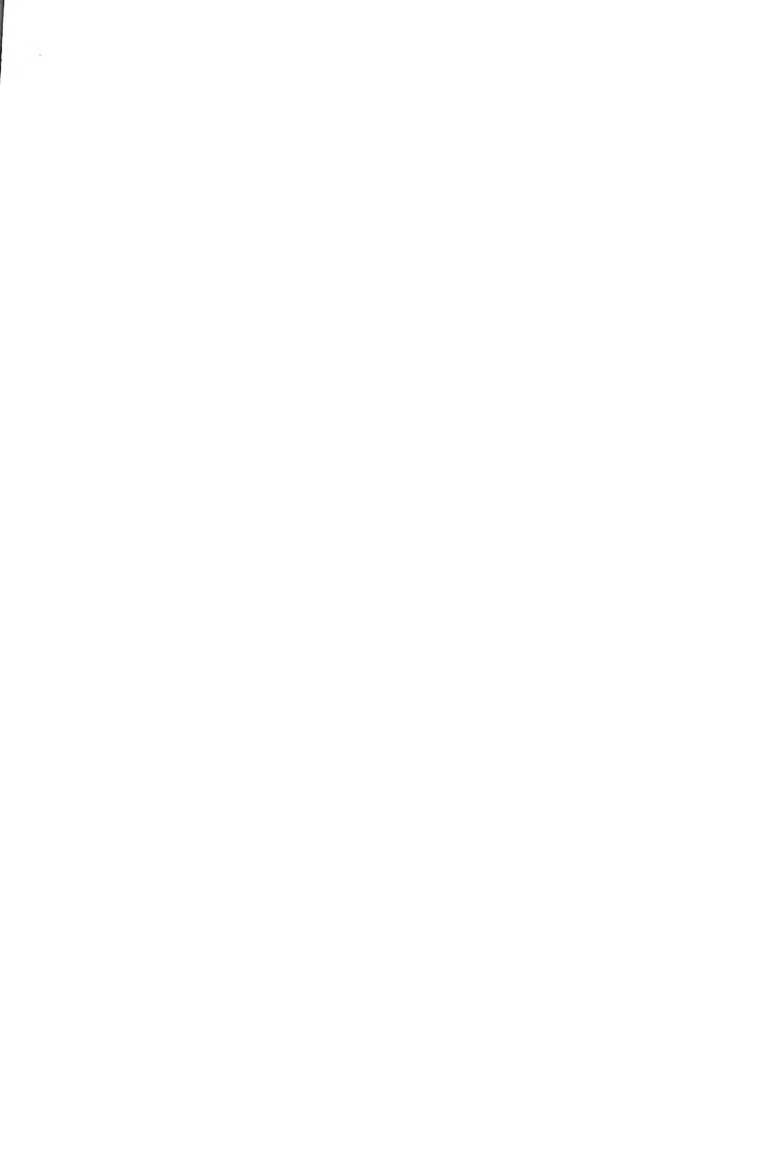
“Then,” said Easton, holding out his hand to say good-bye, “I shall go and help him into bed—tuck him in, and sing a soft lullaby over his pillow. Good-night, Miss Winter. Good-night, Miss Grace.”

Miss Winter slept at Brook Street that night, according to previous arrangement. She was soon left alone in her bed-room. Helen complained of sleepiness, and, contrary to her custom, did not return to brush her

hair before her friend's fire—a mysterious operation, entailing the loss of an hour's sleep, and accompanied by considerable conversation.

The elder lady did not appear to be suffering from drowsiness. Indeed, she was very wide awake. She threw herself upon the bed, all dressed, in a ridiculously girlish pose, and lay there thinking.

“If it had been any other man,” she meditated aloud, “I should have said that he could not possibly go now; but with him one cannot tell. The arm would hardly stop him, though something—else—might. Poor Claud Tyars! the *naïveté* with which he displayed a perfect indifference as to *my* life was very full of meaning.”



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